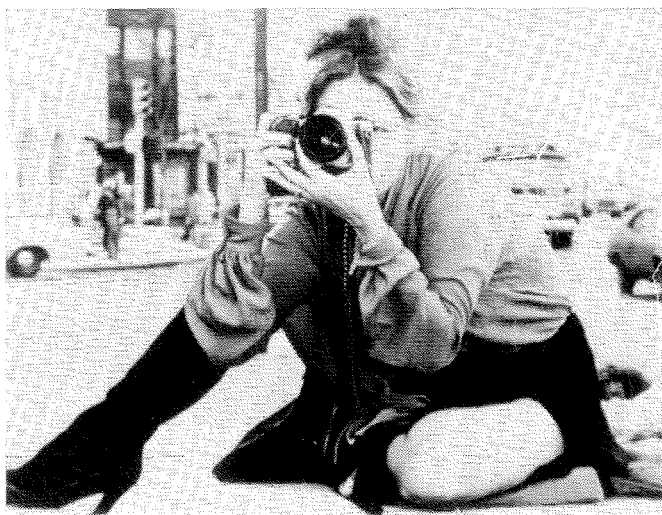


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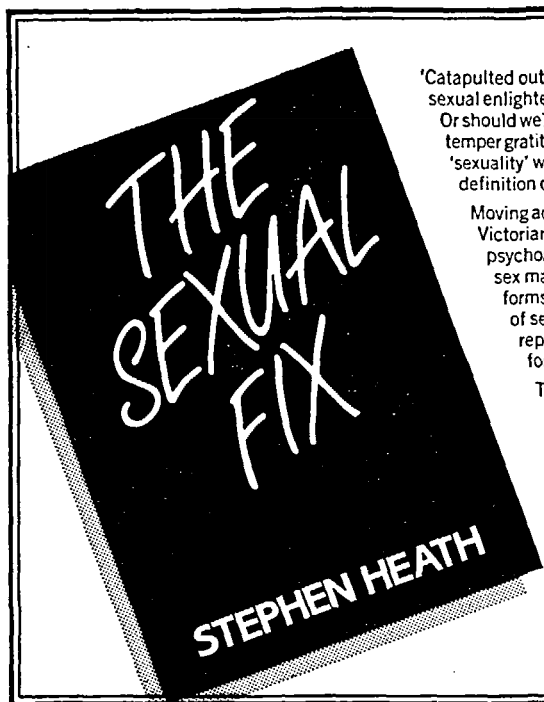
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STATEMENT

This special double issue focuses on the power relations involved in the activity of looking—at films, photography, pin-ups and paintings. It is predominantly feminist, and inaugurates a sustained attempt by the new *Screen* to argue through issues of sexual politics, not only in the pages of the journal but by the editorial board and in organised SEFT activities. While we achieved many of our aims in putting together this issue, we also encountered difficulties.

A number of journals, particularly American, have recently produced special feminist issues on sexuality. Clearly, the subject is fashionable, but apart from its evident saleability, there are historical and political reasons why *Screen*, in particular, is taking it on board now. At this time feminist theory and practice is organising and campaigning around issues of pornography, rape and violence against women, issues which explicitly raise questions of power relations in society, and in representation. Indeed, representation is seen as a crucial area of struggle, and cinema in particular has been a focus of political activity by certain tendencies in the Women's Movement—the picketing of screenings of *Dressed To Kill*, for example. Feminist theory and politics are meeting, not too happily, on this ground — a political conjuncture which provides the impetus for this issue.

Screen has been influential in carving out theories of cinematic representation, and in indicating how they might be useful for feminist politics. Now feminist politics poses problems for theory from a number of directions, and it is this wider social context that we want to engage with here and in future issues. A concern with the social context

of theory and politics has been missing from the pages of the journal in recent years, partly because the historical context which provided the impetus for its work in the early '70s has changed radically. Effective and influential as *Screen* was, its address was increasingly perceived as an authoritative intellectual and academic voice which often blocked contributions from and engagement with other political positions. The *Screen* style of writing became rather exclusive and intimidating, alienating many potential readers and contributors, particularly women, whose social access to theoretical language and writing is less secure than that of men. We have deliberately encouraged contributions from writers who are new to *Screen*, and who in many cases don't conform to its project of formulating advanced theory. In carrying out this commitment we have had to break down a general resistance to the journal's hegemony, which has involved extra work talking and liaising with writers under the extreme pressure of a new bi-monthly schedule. At the same time, 'old' *Screen* writers have been encouraged to be more accessible, without abandoning important theoretical work. This issue includes articles which develop the problematics of film theory, together with short, polemical pieces coming out of specific areas of practice, such as the political and educational work of lectures, programming and exhibition. We have tried to bring together different kinds and textures of writing which would interrogate one another, and were pleasurably surprised at the way these differences reverberate across the issue. This has been one of the advantages of *Screen's* new policy of 'theme writing'.

In asserting our aims and commitments in this issue we are aware that we have not been entirely successful, and that we have produced new problems. Feminist theory and politics is enormously

active and productive at present, and we wanted to engage with feminist work in other cultural journals, and in feminist writing generally. But in drawing on the energy behind feminist theoretical work, we don't want to confine ourselves to producing 'special feminist issues', yet another ghetto or commodity. The productivity and availability of feminist work on cinema should feed into the ongoing work of *Screen* and SEFT and not be left to women board members in a spirit of liberal tolerance. Male theorists often draw on the work of feminist film theory to support their own arguments; more rarely do they explore the ways in which feminist theory and politics 'unsettle' their preconceptions, or challenge the terms of their theoretical approaches. Questions of sexual politics are notoriously difficult to talk through and put into practice, particularly under the pressures of time and money. We see this as a major project for *Screen* and SEFT in future; the inclusion of articles on masculinity and male homosexuality was intended to be part of this project, but we have notably failed to include discussion from women on lesbian issues. We should like to take this opportunity to invite and encourage such articles for future issues.

Another new departure is signalled by this issue: a full-scale engagement or confrontation with contemporary mainstream cinema and its pleasures, Hollywood in particular. This is partly because feminist political activity often takes the form of an assault on the production, distribution and exhibition of mainstream cinema, which it sees as supporting degrading representations of women (the *Dressed To Kill* debate again) and partly because mainstream cinema has in recent years taken up 'feminism' and 'feminist issues' as saleable commodities in much the same way as it is now taking up 'gay politics'. The issue is heavily slanted towards the mainstream, raising the question of

how *Screen*, with its commitment to oppositional independent cinema, should proceed in its support for that cinema, particularly at this time of technological and economic changes in film production, distribution and exhibition. This question will be raised in future issues of the journal and in SEFT activities.

Screen and SEFT are committed to work in a number of interrelated areas: education, TV, independent cinema, feminism and sexual politics. We haven't managed to cover them all here, and we hope that the problems we have encountered in putting together this issue, the gaps it displays, will become the subject of further discussion rather than discreetly ignored. In spite of, or perhaps because of those problems, it has been a pleasurable (albeit labour-intensive) experience attempting to make space in which difficult and contentious issues can be openly confronted rather than simply exchanged between intellectuals. This issue will be followed by one which includes substantial coverage of debates around pornography and censorship, and we should like to solicit pieces for future issues on the practices and politics of teaching the media; and cinema and television in national and international contexts.

(THE ISSUE EDITORS: JOHN CAUGHIE, JANE CLARKE, PAM COOK, MANDY MERCK, GILLIAN SKIRROW.)

Editorial apologies for an omission in Frank Krutnik's 'Desire, Transgression and James M Cain' (May/June 1981): a footnote acknowledging the article's debt to Women In Film Noir (BFI, 1980), specifically Pam Cook's 'Duplicity in Mildred Pierce' and Claire Johnston's 'Double Indemnity', was accidentally deleted.

'THE EYES OF LAURA MARS': A BINOCULAR CRITIQUE

TWO APPROACHES TO THE FILM BY
LUCY FISCHER AND MARCIA LANDY



INTRODUCTION

IN RECENT YEARS the criticism on women and film has surfaced strategies for identifying the nature and presence of male dominated vision in cinematic discourse. Psychoanalysis, in particular, has provided a method and language for reading texts and locating their patriarchal ideology. Such readings, however, have limited their scope to the text and have not taken into account the film's impact on audience or the stylistic devices through which the text is materialised. Furthermore, they do not place their analyses within a broader consideration of the film's existence as a product in the marketplace, its relationship to film traditions and genres, and its interaction with other cultural practices.

In order to raise questions about the incompleteness of such readings, we are proposing a two-part essay in which these critical issues will be addressed. Part One will offer a serious reading of a film that remains within the boundaries of the text. In particular, the reading will entertain a psychoanalytic examination of the narrative as a way of identifying the sexual politics of the film. Part Two will place that reading in dialogue with a consideration of the film's mode of production, its stylistic strategies, its cultural allusions, and, thereby, test the adequacy of the reading for deciphering the position of women. Through structuring our essay in this manner, we will address the question of how to read a film so as to avoid treating it as a static, hermetic object and, rather, view it as a dynamic system in interaction with its own multiple codes and with other cultural articulations.

We have chosen, specifically, to examine *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978), directed by Irvin Kershner, because the film openly raises

certain relevant issues concerning the representation of women in film: the relationship between sexual oppression, violence and pornography, and the role of film, television, advertising and photography in producing and reproducing patriarchal ideology. Furthermore, *Laura Mars* seems to be capable of generating controversy because it can provide diametrically opposing reactions. When we recently taught the film, for example, the students in the class were divided as to whether the film was unmitigated pornography because of its unrelieved fusion of sex, aggression, and spectacle, or a subtle exposure of sexual politics, surfacing connections between female subordination and the media's exploitation of ways of seeing women.

How can a film be considered by some viewers as critically progressive and as ideologically suspect by others? The answer to this question may be located in the problematics of the text, or it may reside in the critical methods brought to bear on it. This essay seeks to address these issues.

I.

Narrative does not show, does not imitate; the passion which may excite us in reading a novel is not that of a 'vision' . . . Rather, it is that of meaning, that of a higher order relation which also has its emotions, its hopes, its dangers, its triumphs.

Roland Barthes,
'Structural Analysis of Narratives'¹

As Roland Barthes has noted in an essay on literature, one of the motivating forces that propels us through narrative is the desire to ascribe meaning to stories, to fathom their significance. Some narratives are openly resistant to such a process, subverting the reader's urge to comprehend. Others seem to invite the enterprise, conveniently providing the reader with the resonant details and clues.

The Eyes of Laura Mars is a work in the latter category. Though on one level it presents itself as merely a transparent genre piece of the thriller/horror variety, on another plane it poses as a work of some self-consciousness that seems to perform the metacritical act of commenting on its own mode of being and address. Thus, *Laura Mars* encourages the viewer not only to naively follow the narrative action, but to peruse it for deeper implications. As Roland Barthes has remarked such an interpretive process has its 'hopes', but also its apparent 'dangers'.

But the question arises as to why *Laura Mars* invites the viewer to undertake such a reading, and, furthermore, what kind of a reading it ultimately engenders. It is the very subject matter of the work that initially intimates a degree of self-reflexivity, since the film suggestively concerns a woman photographer whose associates are killed by a madman, and furthermore whose vision becomes progressively associated with that of the murderer himself. Given this emphasis on photography and sight in a voyeuristic mad-slasher movie, the spectator is invited to assume a certain self-consciousness on the part of the film-makers, and to

¹ Roland Barthes, 'Structural Analysis of Narratives', *Image, Music, Text*, trans Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, p 124. (Emphasis ours.)

wonder whether the work might perform an autocritique. If the viewer accepts such an invitation, what kind of a reading might he or she formulate? And what are its 'hopes', and its 'dangers'?

To begin such an analysis, it is useful to return to the title of the film which emphasizes the *eyes* of Laura Mars – her sight, her vision. This, of course, refers to her narrative status as a photographer, and also to her role as a psychic 'seer' of the murderer's villainous acts. Furthermore, throughout the film her 'look' is stressed through an optical eye/iconography of close-ups of her eyeballs, poised in gaping horror. But beyond the issue of her literal sight, lies the more intriguing question of her 'vision' as a photographer. What kind of a vision is it, and what are its implications within the narrative discourse?

Laura Mars is a high-fashion photographer whose work has an original cast to it. Her poses involve mostly female models in postures of stylised violence. In many of the pictures they seem to be victims: in one, a woman in garters lies draped across a bed, as though she had been murdered. In other photographs the models seem disturbingly aggressive, as in the image of a woman holding a gun over a dead man in a pool. In yet other pictures, the women seem engaged in a lesbian struggle. In a sequence Laura shoots at Columbus Circle, two models in underwear and fur coats, enact a hairpulling 'girlie fight', while posed against the background of a burning car. The sado-masochistic thrust of her photography is clear, with women placed either in the role of mutilated victims or Amazonian assailants. In both situations women's bodies are fetishised and the connection made between female sexuality and violence.

Clearly, we recognize in the images created by Laura Mars an iconography oppressive to women, a vision that is decidedly patriarchal. Whether her models are portrayed as passive objects of brutality or perpetrators of violence themselves, they function not as females but as the sign of male sexual fears. In their aggressive postures they enact a threat to man, and in their stance as victims, they are 'punished' for it. In this respect, the high-fashion photography of Laura Mars shares much with the *mise-en-scène* of pornography which, as critics have noted, shapes 'female sexuality in the image of male sexual fantasies'.²

Thus, Laura Mars has what we might term 'male vision' – a way of seeing that reflects the dominant sexist ideology. Perhaps that is why the décor of her apartment favours mirrors which constantly barrage her with the sight of the female image. Within this context, even her name seems filled with significance, since Mars was a Roman war god and his astrological sign has been used as the symbol of masculinity. Even the narrative action of the film raises this issue quite explicitly when a reporter at Laura's gallery opening asks her to respond to charges that her work is 'offensive to women'.

In the sense we have used the term thus far, 'male vision' has been meant metaphorically, to suggest that Laura sees 'like' a man. But what is interesting about the film is that it articulates this notion on a literal level. Whereas Laura tells us that years ago she saw artistic flashes of

² Susan Lurie, 'Pornography and The Dread of Women: The Male Sexual Dilemma', *Take Back The Night*, ed Laura Lederer, New York, William Morrow, 1980, p 159. Lurie's remarks on the male fear of female power are reminiscent of the earlier theories of Karen Horney. See Karen Horney, 'The Dread of Woman', in *Feminine Psychology*, ed Harold Kelman, New York, W W Norton & Co, 1967.

violence that inspired her work, now she experiences literal visions in which she sees through the eyes of a male killer. What is intriguing about this narrative configuration is not Laura's status as a psychic, which seems a mere narrative ploy. Rather, what stands out is the connection implied between Laura's work as a photographer and the act of homicide, her artistic vision and the murderer's point of view. Significantly, the victims are all associated with Laura or her work, and include her editor, her models, her manager and her husband. Furthermore, her moments of second sight are linked to her photographic practice. After her first episode (which comes as a kind of nightmare), she immediately goes to her light box and examines a series of pictures, while playing nervously with a pair of scissors. At another point, a psychic vision hits her while she is developing prints, and then, while she is in the middle of a photographic session. Even the dialogue seems to emphasise the ties between her photographic enterprise and murder: 'Kill the shoot!' her manager, Donald, screams as Laura finds herself unable to continue work. Finally, when she is brought to the police station for questioning about the murders, a detective, John Neville, points out the parallels between her fashion compositions and unpublished crime snapshots.



The patriarchal heroine: Laura Mars moves from the camera to the gun.

Thus, through its particular choice of narrative actions, the film literalises the notion of Laura's 'male' vision. Her work is not only influenced by a patriarchal point of view, but her sight is literally taken over by that of a man. At the moments of her psychic inspiration, her own female vision is blinded—and she stumbles around her environment, bumping into walls. In this respect, the film seems to operate as a kind of cautionary tale for the male-oriented woman who, in adopting patriarchal attitudes,

cannot fail but to oppress her own sex, to engage symbolically in their murder. By the end of the film, Laura has even taken in hand the killer's gun – an object she has consistently refused to recognise as an extension of her photographic lens. Laura's 'confusion' regarding gender identification seems encapsulated in a particular image of her manager, Donald, who dresses up in her clothes one night to help throw police body guards off her trail.

There is yet another aspect of the narrative and stylistic construction of *Laura Mars* that makes it suggestive as a discourse on male/female vision and it has to do with the moments in which Laura, herself, is pursued. At these times, since she sees through the eyes of the killer, she views herself in the third person, from behind, stalked from some hidden vantage point. The first such occurrence takes place in her dockside studio, when the killer chases her down a hall. As she runs into Donald's arms for safety, she cries: 'I saw him looking at me.' The final instance of this trope occurs at the end of the film when the killer is revealed to be the policeman, John Neville.

Again what is provocative about this narrative/stylistic device is the way it can be read to literalise an issue in the ideology of vision. In an often-quoted section of *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger states:

*... men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. . . . The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.*³

It is precisely this split consciousness of the male-oriented woman that is dramatised in the vision of Laura Mars. When her sight is dominated by the killer, she literally sees herself as an object, and her consciousness functions both as the 'surveyor' and the 'surveyed'. Within the narrative, this can be read as the logical extension of her photographic work in which she generates images of women designed to satisfy the male gaze.

Even the fact that Laura is symbolically 'punished' for her work seems contained within a patriarchal ideology. In the same text, John Berger talks of how female nude models were often posed holding a mirror. He remarks:

*You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.*⁴

³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, New York, Penguin, 1977, p 47.

⁴ *ibid*, p 51.

In *Laura Mars*, of course, the mirror has been augmented by a camera, but she, too, stands chastised for treating women as men have trained her – as an object of sight.

There is a final way in which the film literalises certain notions concerning male vision and, in this regard, has particular relevance to film. In her article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey discusses how dramatic movies are structured according to the

male gaze. Through the figure of a central hero, the audience is led to identify with a masculine perspective. As she writes:

*The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusions in which he articulates the look and creates the action.*⁵

Thus, though women may be present in the film, it is the male characters (and, by extension the male audience) who are the 'active controllers of the look', and who, therefore, dominate the narrative trajectory.⁶

Though in most classical films this dynamic is masked by codes of seamless editing, in *Laura Mars* the control of the male gaze is brought to the surface, as part of the actual plot. In an article on 'Myths of Women in the Cinema', Claire Johnston terms women the 'pseudocenter of the filmic discourse' because they function only as signs of male consciousness.⁷ Again, in *Laura Mars* this concept is literalised in the figure of a photographer whose mind and body seem almost 'inhabited' by a male double.

While emphasising male vision, the film also seems to enact a prohibition against female vision, another feature of sexist ideology. While man is traditionally posited as the ideal spectator and woman positioned as the object of his surveillance, she is never accorded an equal scopic stance. Rather her vision must be entirely muted and passive, and she must never actively return the look. Again, the plot of *Laura Mars* articulates this repression. In the beginning of the film, Laura instructs her male beauticians to highlight the models' eyes, to make them 'pop out'. But once the murderer begins stabbing his victims' eyes, she instructs her make-up artists to tone them down, to hide them with waves of hair. Thus, within the film, women are symbolically warned against looking, and their vision regarded as a clear and present threat to man. It is as though the female look had the power to arouse some deep-seated male anxiety, and to trigger some violent retaliatory response. In this regard, one thinks of the shocking image of the eye being slashed in Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, and of Jean Vigo's critical question: 'When we flinch from the screen image of a woman's eye sliced in half by a razor, is it more dreadful than the spectacle of a cloud veiling a full moon?'⁸

But on what is this apparent dread of woman based? And, moreover, what is its relevance to *The Eyes of Laura Mars*? Once again, it is the very narrative of the film that invites us to examine the issue. For when the identity of the murderer is revealed, the killer is portrayed as a psychopath who offers us a tendentious monologue to 'explain' the roots of his crime. Neville stands there before Laura and begins talking in the third person, as though the biography he recounts pertains to Laura's chauffeur, Tommy, on whom he is trying to pin the heinous deeds. He talks of how 'his' mother was a hysterical woman, a hooker, who left him in dirty diapers for days at a time, while 'she sold her ass in the streets of the nation's capital'. Laura interrupts on several occasions, bewildered, objecting: 'No, that's not Tommy's story.' Gradually, Neville's mono-

⁵ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, p 13.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Claire Johnston, 'Myths of Women in the Cinema', *Women and the Cinema*, eds Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, New York, E P Dutton, 1977, p 411.

⁸ Jean Vigo, 'On Un Chien Andalou' in Luis Bunuel, *L'age D'or and Un Chien Andalou*, trans Marianne Alexandre, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1968, p 75.

logue shifts to the first person as he tells her how one day a man (who may have been the child's father) appeared and slit the prostitute's throat as punishment for her maternal negligence. Neville goes on: 'I sat there and watched the blood dry on her face until it was just about the color of your hair.' 'Neville, you said "I",' Laura gasps. This confusion in person continues later on as Neville puts a gun in Laura's hands and, in a gesture of suicide, tries to force her to shoot him. He tells her: 'If you love *me*, kill *him*...'

Other narrative/stylistic details of this sequence seem loaded with significance and encourage the spectator's decoding. The final confrontation scene takes place, for example, against a background of mirrors, with Neville's and Laura's reflections frequently divided into a triptych. And at the crucial moment when Neville finally breaks down, he takes his icepick and stabs his reflection three times in the eye.

This smorgasbord of Freudian symbolism is difficult for the viewer of healthy semantic appetite to resist. Unlike the end of *Psycho*, where a psychiatric explanation is offered dryly as a kind of closing convention, in *Laura Mars* the scene addresses the audience with high drama and pathos, and solicits their complicity. But what does the scene mean? And can it be read to display any intelligence on the part of the film-makers concerning psycho-sexual dynamics? On a certain level it can, for what the scene tends to dramatise is the classical male fear of woman as linked to the maternal figure. Furthermore, it posits that fear as a pathology and views it as the potential cause of violence toward women.

In an insightful article on pornography, critic Susan Lurie sees male brutality toward women (be it physical or symbolic) as an exorcism of infantile castration fears. As she writes: 'the torture, rape, mutilation of women... reverses the death threat associated with the castration men fear from women.'⁹ But wherein does this danger lie?

In her explanation of this phenomenon, Lurie differs somewhat from Freud. Whereas he sees male anxieties as stemming from the perception of the female 'lack'—her disturbing absence of a penis—Lurie sees male fears as derived from a sense of what females possess—of their power. While desiring bodily and spiritual reunion with the mother, the male child suspects that this will mean castration. As Lurie remarks:

*... he fantasizes that union with Mother is to be what she is, not what he is. That is he fantasizes that this union is one in which Mother's superior will presides to so great an extent that he is formed in her likeness. And while this seems to have been a satisfactory, indeed delightful, arrangement during infancy, his present individual/sexual self, symbolized in his penis, clearly could not survive such an arrangement.*¹⁰

⁹ Lurie, *op cit*, p 172.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp 162-163.

Thus Lurie emphasises the notion of female *power* rather than that of female *lack*. She sees the man's view of woman as 'castrated' as arising only as a second-order configuration, and not the primary source of his fear. As she states:

*The concept of the 'mutilated creature' is a wish-fulfillment fantasy intended to combat the early imagined dread of what his mother's intentional power ... might have in store for him.*¹¹

Lurie also implicitly critiques Freud's notion of identifying the threat of castration with the father. Rather, she sees the male fear as tied to anxieties regarding the maternal force.

Clearly, as Neville recounts his autobiographical history in *Laura Mars*, many elements of Lurie's analysis of male-female psychodynamics are present. His infantile fear of the mother (and her prostitute's sexual powers) have obviously been transformed into hostility. And in his image of her slit throat, we see a version of Lurie's fantasy of the 'mutilated creature,' or what Laura Mulvey has elsewhere termed 'the bearer of the bleeding wound'.¹² Finally, in the gesture of Neville's forcing the gun into Laura's reluctant hand, and squeezing the trigger into his belly, we find dramatised the male fear of woman as appropriator of the phallus through some violent destructive act.

Given this context, it comes as no surprise when Neville ultimately stabs himself in the eye, as though a symbolic punishment for viewing his mother as object of dread and desire. As various feminist critics have pointed out, the sexual implications of a man robbed of his sight go far beyond the Oedipal tale.¹³ In a different Greek myth, the seer, Tiresius, is blinded by Hera after he has declared female sexuality more pleasurable than male. And in another legend, Peeping Tom is blinded for looking at the nude body of Lady Godiva.

Neville's confession also hints at Oedipal conflicts, though (contrary to Freud) it casts the father more in the role of saviour than aggressor. Still, the Oedipal triangle seems clearly implied in the plethora of triadic mirror images which flood the final sequence. Furthermore, Laura is portrayed in the closing sections of the film in a maternal stance – at one point wearing a madonna-like scarf. Even her characterisation as psychically potent can be seen as a transposition of the notion of Mother as a magical force. Finally, as Neville's monologue veers toward incomprehensibility, he speaks to Laura as though he had a rival for her affections. 'I don't know what you see in that guy,' he complains incoherently. 'I'm the one you want.' His persona in this speech (which shifts fluidly between that of his father, his mother and Laura) parallels his earlier split between first and third person, as though he were the psychic battlefield for some struggle of identity and identification.

What this discussion of *Laura Mars* has sought to demonstrate is the kind of reading that the film readily occasions. It presents itself to the viewer as more than a simple thriller or horror movie – a story of crime and its resolution. Rather, its dense and allusive surface proposes it as a veritable discourse on the issues of violence toward women, and the psycho-sexual dynamics of sight. It does so by suggestively taking as its subject the figure of a photographer, one who exploits women in her work. Then, quite fittingly, it casts the photographer as 'possessed' by

¹¹ *ibid*, p 165.

¹² Mulvey, *op cit*, p 7.

¹³ See Lurie, *op cit*, and Lucy Fischer, 'The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of Dames,' *Genre: The Musical* ed Rick Altman, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, pp 70-84.

the vision of a deranged male sex killer, whose homicidal point of view becomes identified with her art. The film even hints at the roots of such misogyny in its characterisation of the murderer as a psychopath whose savage acts are clearly compensatory for his fear of women. The film then goes on to associate his hatred of females with the dynamics of vision: with the dread of viewing the 'castrated' female body, and the voyeuristic pleasure of seeing women sexually abused. Moreover, through its choice of the killer's particular crime, the film alludes to man's horror of the woman, who reverses the dynamics of vision, who dares to look back.

Read in this fashion, *The Eyes of Laura Mars* appears to document a psycho-sexual problem which afflicts the cinema as a scopic medium, and especially the sensational horror/thriller genre. To borrow Roland Barthes's language from the opening quote, we might say that such an interpretation can, at least, raise such 'hopes' for the text. But following Barthes's line of thought a bit further, we might question whether such a generous exegesis is truly exhaustive, or whether it might mask certain critical 'dangers'. It is for this reason that we have chosen not to take just a monocular view of *The Eyes of Laura Mars*, but rather to see it in dual focus in a gesture of binocular critical vision.

II.

*During the last few years, an overlay of erstwhile mythic significance has become a valuable selling tool (or so many producers and directors think) and the result has been that a number of very small films have been invested with a grandiose importance the weight of which they can hardly bear. Irvin Kershner's **The Eyes of Laura Mars** (1978) is a perfect example of this ploy. At the center of the film is a very short, rather silly plot upon which is hung great gobs of would-be-significance. Semioticians speak of a sign of communication composed of two equal halves: the 'signifier' and the 'signified.' A film like **Laura Mars** is all signifiers that never connect with the signifieds. Or to put it more poetically, full of sound and fury.*

James Monaco, *American Film Now*¹⁴

It is interesting that Monaco singles out *Laura Mars* to exemplify the banality and seductiveness of many contemporary Hollywood films. Apparently he selects it because it is a film capable of generating misreadings. Yet the film deserves more than Monaco's hasty dismissal. As the discussion above has shown, the film does connect its signifiers and signifieds. The problem is not, as Monaco indicates, that the film says nothing but that it says everything. This section will examine *Laura Mars* as an eclectic film which, in its very eclecticism, subverts its own ostensible intentions. Our previous discussion reveals how the film documents the classic paradigm of female oppression, but if we place that reading within the dynamics of a larger filmic discourse, the question arises as to whether *Laura Mars* exposes the phenomenon of male-dominated vision and the cultural hostility toward women, or merely

¹⁴ James Monaco, *American Film Now*, New York, New American Library, 1979, p 275.

exploits its audience in the name of these issues, or does both at the same time. A second analysis of the film is therefore necessary.

Laura Mars belongs to the Hollywood 'new wave' of films identified with independent producers, featuring prestigious directors such as Francis Ford Coppola, John Frankenheimer, Arthur Penn, Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, and others. This generation of producers and directors is reputed to have a larger measure of control over their works in contrast to the forms of production characteristic of the old studio system. Great involvement in financing has enabled directors to have more influence over subject matter and treatment of films, enabling them to entertain a broad array of issues in ostensibly more direct fashion. The 1968 lifting of the censorship code and the institution of a rating system in the United States have further encouraged the representation of formerly taboo subjects as divorce, adultery, sexual relations, social deviance, and violence in more explicit ways.

Yet a closer examination of the economic structures governing these films exposes the illusory nature of independent production. Most particularly, the tendency toward conglomeration in the '70s has made the movie industry more dependent than ever on immediate and large-scale profits and especially on the control of outside investors. The nature of conglomeration is such that the production of film is only one aspect of a network of merged but diversified industries. For example, James Monaco describes how MCA, 'one of the first film conglomerates to take shape . . . own several record companies, Spencer Gift stores, a train manufacturer, a savings and loan association in Colorado, a computer service company, and three publishers: G. R. Putnam's Sons, Coward, MacCann, and Geohegan; and Berkley; as well as *New Times* magazine.'¹⁵

The effects of conglomeration have been mixed. Studios in danger of disappearance have been salvaged by the new system. The 'new corporation men', according to Michael Pye and Lynda Myles, 'lacked the technical knowledge that past producers shared. Their ignorance now distances them from the film-makers. But it also makes them dependent on the film-makers, on being offered ideas from directors, writers, and producers who are younger, who know the art and craft of film, and who know a world outside the studio machine and have some instinctive sympathy with the new cine-literate generation that comprises the majority of film audiences.'¹⁶ But, as Monaco has also suggested, today film has become more of a business than an industry with an emphasis on profit first, the product second. The product can be as 'disparate as film and insurance, records and sugar cane',¹⁷ and loss in one area can be compensated for in another; however, the commitment to film is considerably lessened under this system of financing and management.

Changes in Hollywood modes of production can be documented in the diminished number of films produced, in the consequent emphasis on creating 'blockbusters', in the high-powered advertising strategies developed for ferreting out audience response, in particular, the use of consumer research methods similar to the hard sell tactics in other areas

¹⁵ *ibid*, p 34.

¹⁶ Michael Pye and Linda Myles, *The Movie Brats*, New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979, p 47.

¹⁷ Monaco, *American Film Now*, p 32.

¹⁸ Richard Combs, 'The Eyes of Laura Mars', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol 45, no 538 (November, 1978), p 219.

of advertising, in the influx of 'outsiders' into the film industry from television, and in the incorporation of eclectic strategies within the films for attracting the broadest possible audiences.

Thus, the process of economic diversification is paralleled in the forms and treatments of these films which draw on different strata of the public. *Laura Mars*, for example, makes an attempt to appeal simultaneously to intellectuals, pop culture fans, horror film buffs, film aesthetes, high fashion consumers, viewers of pornography, and the budding moral majority. The film also tries to make contact with the earlier genre film production, altering it to suit contemporary audiences. The thriller/horror film, in particular, continues to enjoy a rebirth, though it incorporates more sophisticated strategies to suit its urbane audiences. As with other genre films that continue to be produced, the use of self-reflexive techniques, psychoanalysis, allusions to political events or movements, a capitalising on social decadence, and a foregrounding and use of high technology and other media characterize the eclecticism of *Laura Mars* in its treatment of genre. This eclecticism applies to the film's style, system of references, narrative strategies and also to its point of view, which seems, at the same time, straightforward and parodic.

Above all, an analysis of many of these films of the seventies and eighties reveal them to be especially self-conscious in their strategies for wooing spectators, 'poised', as one critic has suggested, 'between mockery and indulgence of the audience'.¹⁸ It would seem, therefore, that a fruitful method for interrogating the ideology of these films would reside in an analysis of their uses of the means and ends of self-reflexivity and spectatorship particularly as these interact with the mode of production described above.

The sound track of *Laura Mars* is heavily dependent on pop music. From the first moment of the film to its conclusion, the lyrics and music serve to identify the film's connection to the world of commercialised pop culture. The introductory and concluding song, in particular, performed by a woman, emphasising imprisonment, psychic pain, and oneiric experience merges with the film's situating of the woman as the focus of vision and of verbal aggression and physical assault. But the music, independent of the narrative, also fuses with the other uses of media in the film to create an autonomous and gratuitous experience for the audience, akin to the self-absorption associated with listening to pop music. The audience can appreciate the music in and of itself, independent of its role in developing the film's thematics. For example, during the scene of the models dressing for a photographic session, a song is heavily overlaid on the sound track, turning the sequence into a disco number. Furthermore, the songs 'Let's All Chant' and 'The Eyes of Laura Mars' (sung by Barbra Streisand) were released well in advance of the film, the former song having occupied a place for a time among the top ten list of hits. Thus, the film was able to tap other resources for arousing audience expectations as well as to capitalise on other avenues of profit.

At the same time that the film woos its pop culture constituency, it also

appeals to intellectuals. For example, early in the film, in a shot of one of the victim's apartments, we see books on Talleyrand and Russia and one by Studs Terkel, which provide further clues to the film's eclecticism. The intellectual allusions are thus fused with the pop culture elements, thereby inviting a diverse audience to view the film. The foregrounding of the book, *The Eyes of Laura Mars*, identified with the film's title, connects the subject matter and style of the book to the film, indicating the circularity and self-enclosed nature of the filmic text, that it is in dialogue with itself.

Laura Mars' attempts at self-reflexivity can further be documented in the film's absorption of still other media. Beyond the uses of pop music, books and photography, the film calls attention to television, TV technology, newscasting, newspaper reporting, celebrity interviewing, and high fashion modelling. Moreover, the playing with onstage, backstage and off-stage settings, in the sequences involving costuming, make-up, directing, and photographing as well as in the casual scenes at home, acts to suppress differences between performance and life, to fuse media spectacle and private experience. The question raised throughout the film, exemplified particularly in the comments of the newscaster at the exhibition of Laura Mars' work is: What is the connection between media practices, sexual exploitation, violence, and profit-making? In his words, 'Is this all a hype?' A woman reporter asserts that the photographs of nude and semi-clothed women are offensive to women, and one of the models comments that the 'world you see is violent' and that the photographs merely mirror that violence for the spectator. Thus, *Laura Mars*, in its self-reflexive gargantuanism, even anticipates and co-opts the potential responses of the external audience.



Self-reflexivity:
Detective Neville at
an exhibition of
Laura Mars'
photography.

The element of spectatorship linked to the film's self-referential ploys also reveals a self-conscious taxonomic treatment of ways of seeing, but like the reiterative use of the split mirrors replicating the image of Laura Mars, the ostensibly different forms of looking merge to reproduce one form of gaze, namely, of aggressive and voyeuristic spectatorship. The first image of the film confronts the external viewer with the close-up image of an eye. A long take forces prolonged viewing of a positive image of Laura Mars which is transformed into a negative image. These shots are repeated at the film's conclusion. The particular object of focus which the audience confronts, the object of mutilation, is the right eye and the instrument of attack is an icepick. The violence that the spectator is forced to observe, is therefore associated with vision and particularly with the monocular vision of the camera eye. Though the murderer is not a photographer, his act of vengeance is merged with the photographer's vision. One scene in the film particularly dramatises this dynamic. When Laura tries to explain to Neville the nature of her second sight, she uses video cameras and monitors for her demonstration.

Furthermore, the external spectator's gaze is identified with the killer's (and with the camera eye). The spectator is positioned in the empty space behind the moving camera which approaches the victim. In these shots, particularly, the identification of the audience with the psychotic and violent criminal is unambiguous. The voyeurism of which Laura is accused by Neville when he first meets her is thus attributed to the external audience as it occupies a privileged space in the scrutiny of mutilation.

Aggressive spectatorship is not limited to the male solely but is also attributed to women in the film. Laura as photographer and particularly as a photographer of female victims shares with the killer a complicit look at the violent destruction of other females. Not only does the film, therefore, reinforce the connection between photography, violence and the victimisation of women but it implicates both sexes in the process. Moreover, the film's self-referentiality serves also to implicate the film itself in reproducing these connections.

Laura Mars also identifies other spectators. For example, when Laura arrives at the gallery, the camera focusses on the street crowd of celebrity seekers who observe her as she emerges from the car. She is subject to the same scrutiny as her models. Her physical appearance is calculated to arouse sexual curiosity. Though her torso is completely covered, a shot of the lower part of her body reveals a deep slit in her skirt as the camera focusses in close up on her exposed thigh and leg. She wears a similar costume in the scenes where she photographs models on the street and, again, the camera focusses on her exposed legs.

During the photographing session, still more spectators are identified. Tommy, the chauffeur, a prime murder suspect, is portrayed suspiciously as a voyeur. Laura's view of the models through the lens is shared with the audience as the scene shows the women fighting with one another and the image of a burning car. The sequence also captures passers-by on the street who become part of the film. While obviously

not scripted, they nonetheless assume a role in the film's incorporation of different spectators. The orchestration of male and female, fictional and 'real' spectators, threatening and random surveillance, are concentric, all leading to the same object of regard, the focus on the female and on scenes of violence, creating a bond of complicity between the internal and external spectators to the film.

The dual structure of narrative and self-referentiality work, therefore, to blur rather than distinguish between filmic and actual events. The reflexivity not only assimilates the audience into the narrative but creates a sense in which the audience is implicated vicariously or actively in the act of looking at and of experiencing a world where there is no escape from media manipulation, psychopathology, and aggression. Like the thriller/horror film to which it is related, *Laura Mars* attempts to exploit a highly-stylised and choreographed use of the camera and editing to unsettle and involve the viewer. The positioning of the victims under surveillance and attack is predictable. They are shown in undefended, vulnerable positions, cornered and unable to escape. The audience, however, does not occupy their position but remains in the aggressive position of the voyeur and demented killer. Unlike Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), where the audience shares the places of aggressor and victim, the spectator in *Laura Mars* is rarely, if at all, in the position of the victims. Moreover, in *Peeping Tom*, we are aware from the outset of the killer's identity, whereas *Laura Mars* adds, among its other affect-arousing strategies, elements of suspense and uncertainty, suggesting further that Kershner is less interested in an analysis of the killer's psychopathology than in the generating of audience involvement.

With the exception of the scenes following the death of two of Laura's models, where Laura and John are walking in the woods and the following scenes where they make love, the film does not provide any safe or tranquil vantage points, any alternative vision of an outlet from the urban-media nightmare. Alone in their homes, women are shown, as in the classic thriller/horror film, as potential targets of male aggression and murder. Furthermore, in Tommy's apartment house, as he ascends to meet Neville, the sounds of marital discord and squabbles over money can be heard in the hall, further contributing to the film's atmosphere of antagonism and discord.

If *Laura Mars* is contrasted with *Peeping Tom*, a film that is also self-reflexive, involving film-making and the equation between spectatorship and aggression, the sexual problematics of Kershner's film can be identified more clearly. In *Peeping Tom*, Powell uses the self-referential elements to distance rather than implicate the audience. Also, the acts of looking and violence are concentrated in the male whose erotic desire is sublimated in the camera eye. The film does not fetishise the female body nor highlight gratuitous scenes of sexual deviance. The killer is identified specifically with his father, the person responsible for warping the son's vision, and the son, in his desire to fuse with the dreaded father, enacts the crime of killing the mother. Thus, the father, not the mother, is the source of conflict. The psychological emphasis in *Laura Mars*, on

the other hand, is disappointment with the mother. The 'explanation' for Neville's aggression, reserved for the final moments of the film, is over-identification with and revenge against the mother.

Throughout the film, the portrayals of men reveal the men to be weak and impotent, and their weakness seems traceable to fantasies of female dominance. One of the policemen comments that 'the city is full of creeps.' Donald, a homosexual, is a victim of the killer's assault. Tommy is an ex-criminal and a voyeur. A gratuitous image of a male dwarf appears early in the film. The police are presented as unsympathetic, lecherous, and trigger-happy, and the murderer himself is a policeman. Michael, Laura's former husband, presents himself as a total failure and an exploiter of women. His impotence and rage against females is most clearly demonstrated in his accusations that Laura's career is to blame for his writer's block.

The fact that Laura Mars' photography corresponds to the police photographs provides further evidence of the film's reductive treatment of the relationship between art and society which sees art merely as a reflection of social decadence, the mirror replication of sexuality and violence without mediation. The film invites the audience to confirm the notion that individuals and institutions are the creation of a 'sick' society, suffering from the absence of family stability and proper male and female roles. Furthermore, the film's fusion of male and female vision does not lead toward a critique of phallocentrism but in an opposite direction toward an attack on shifting sexual relations, identified as a major source of pathology. The male killer and the female photographer proclaim themselves to be 'old-fashioned' and moral, and both are presented as stunted by their perverse environment in their capacity for a 'natural' life. Thus in the final analysis, the film veers toward nostalgia and traditional sexual attitudes. In effect, Laura Mars' costume provides a clue to the film's operations. Like the severe, old-fashioned outfits she wears, the film maintains a conventional moral view, but it has an ideological 'slit' which invites prurience and undercuts this point of view. In this way, *Laura Mars* sustains diverse and contradictory attitudes.

Finally, it is in the film's eclecticism that it most reveals the way it produces ideology. Not only does an analysis of the content confirm the reproduction of familiar sexual attitudes but an analysis of the form, the film's system of references, and, especially, its treatment of audience, reveals the film's cynicism and its complicity with exploitative modes for generating cinematic involvement. In spite of the film's uses of self-reflexivity, the distancing devices associated with such a practice are absent, and the treatment of spectatorship seems to corroborate that the film reproduces the ways of seeing it purports to question, specifically in its exploitation of voyeurism toward the ends of profit. The film's treatment of ostensibly different modes of spectatorship have culminated in a familiar gaze, the gaze that fixes on the helpless victims— independent females, homosexuals, or social deviants, all figures of marginality. The film's concern with marginality functions in the now-familiar ideological

terrain where society is viewed as being threatened by socially aberrant behavior. The film points an accusing finger at these social 'misfits' as the products and producers of conflict and commercial exploitation. Capitalising on pop music, on the glamour and increasing prestige of high fashion photography, the screen presence of a star like Faye Dunaway, and the appeals of high and low culture commodities, *Laura Mars* combines hard sell advertising techniques with traditional content. Moreover, not only is the audience asked to experience the threat of an unstable world but it is coerced to share the responsibility for that world, even to view itself as the producer of the images it consumes.

Thus, it would seem that the film's combination of self-referentiality, and studied spectatorship, its inclusion of the issues of homosexuality, psycho-pathology, and abuse of women are mere strategies for seducing the broadest possible audience by means of the most diverse techniques. In the final analysis, this diversity is transformed into the unitary objective of profit-making and the medium of exchange is, as always, the female body, violence, and aggressive vision.

September 1982

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A SUBJECT FOR THE SEVENTIES.

CHARLOTTE BRUNSDON TRACES THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN 'INDEPENDENT' HEROINE

¹ *Girlfriends* was independently produced, and then distributed by Warners.

² It might be more appropriate to see *Goodbar* in relation to *Coma* and *The Eyes of Laura Mars*, with a much less specifically feminine address.

³ Rosalind Coward discusses some of these factors in a more extended way in 'Sexual Liberation and the Family' *m/f* 1978, no 1, pp 7-24.

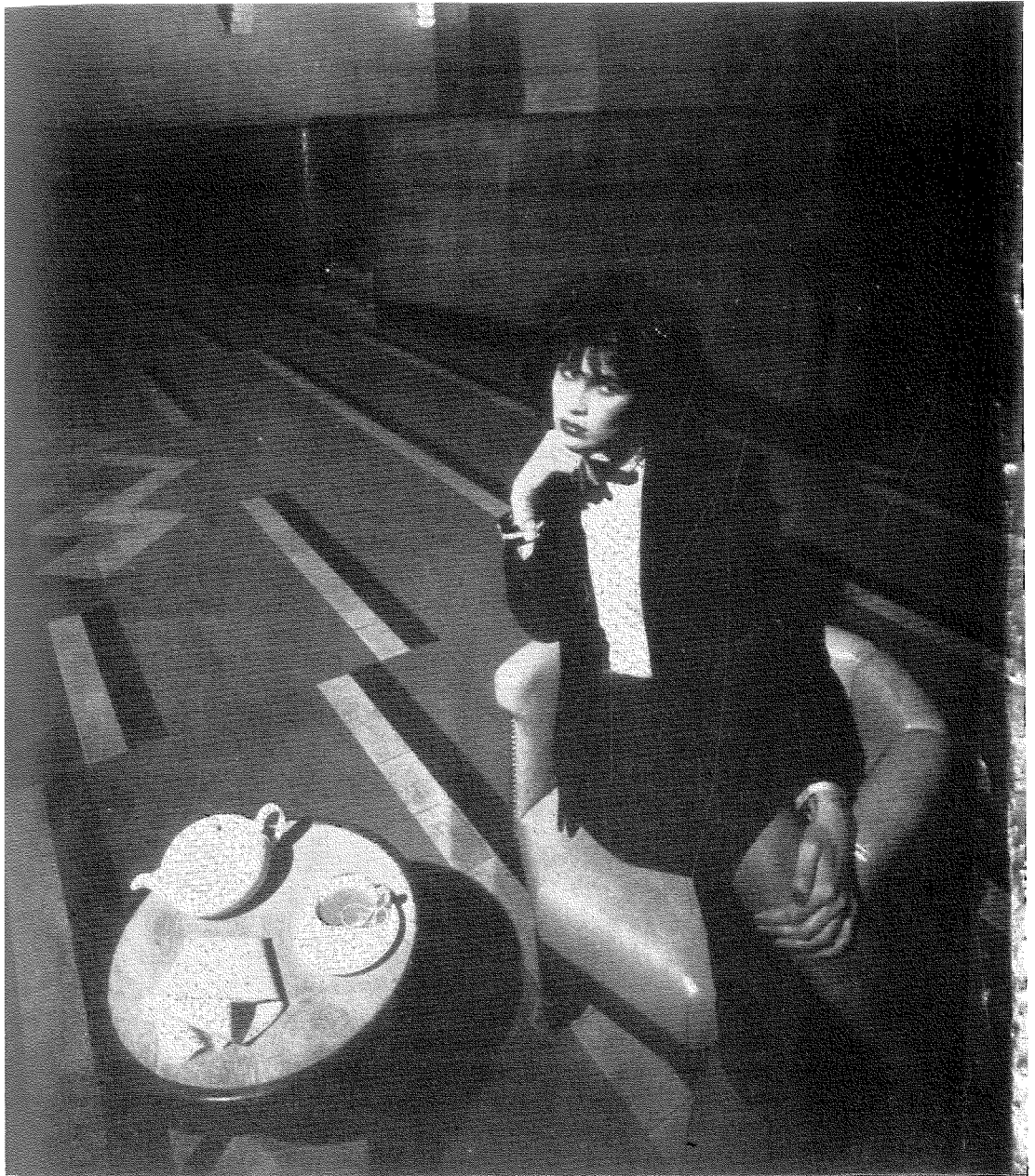
⁴ I am indebted to Jane Clarke's unpublished work on the woman's picture.

⁵ This section is informed by Janice Winship's unpublished work, on *Cosmopolitan*.

AN UNMARRIED WOMAN is one of a number of '70s Hollywood films which could be read to address and construct, however obliquely, changing conceptions of the appropriate modes of femininity in contemporary Western culture. Films such as *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (Scorsese, 1974), *Three Women* (Altman, 1977), *Looking for Mr Goodbar* (Brooks, 1977), *The Turning Point* (Ross, 1978), *Julia* (Zinnesman, 1978), *Girlfriends* (Weill, 1978), *Old Boyfriends* (Tewkesbury, 1979) can be loosely grouped together through their use of central female protagonists.¹ In the main, they can be seen as aimed at a specifically female audience, in a period where there has been increasing differentiation of target audiences.²

The existence, and construction, of this 'new' female audience can only be properly understood in relation to a whole range of extra cinematic social, political and economic factors (for example, changing patterns of women's employment and education; increasingly effective and available contraception; the fall in the birthrate, with changing patterns of marriage and divorce; the impact of the Women's Liberation Movement itself) whose interplay is too complex to be investigated here.³ The cinematic history of these films lies partly with the 'woman's pictures' of the '30s, '40s and '50s, and later, with television soap-opera.⁴ Crucially, all these texts can be read to be concerned with the conflicting demands on, and contradictory and fragmented nature of, femininities constructed within masculine hegemony (which is not to suggest that these texts are all reducible to the same concerns, or can be compared with 'non-patriarchal' femininities.) These '70s films have received a fairly mixed reception from feminists and film critics concerned with sexual political issues, ranging from angry rejection ('incorporation') to qualified welcome. I would argue that they are of interest to those concerned with sexual politics because they represent an address to, and the attempted construction of, a new audience - 'Cosmo Girl'. White, youngish, heterosexual and an aspirant professional (Alice can wait tables, but she really

MEET THE NEW TEA LADY.



A 'post-feminist' advertisement for a product aimed at women.

⁶ Rosalind Coward 'Underneath We're Angry', *Time Out*, February 27-March 5 1981, no 567, pp 5-7.

⁷ Sue Clayton, 'Cherchez la Femme', *City Limits*, April 30-May 6 1982, pp 44-45.

⁸ The '70s films are discussed as a group by: Julie Davidson, 'So Long, Buddy, It's Back to the Woman's Movie', *Cosmopolitan*, September 1978, pp 128-131; Joan Mellen, 'The Return of Women to Seventies Films', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* Fall 1978, vol 3 no 4, pp 525-543; Varda Burstyn 'Sex and Class in the Hollywood Cinema', *Canadian Women's Studies* 1981, vol 3 no 2, pp 22-28. On individual films: Christine Geraghty, 'Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore', *Movie* 1976, no 22, pp 39-42; Elizabeth Cowie (on *Coma*), 'The Popular Film as Progressive Text', *m/f* 1979, no 3, pp 59-81; 1980, no 4, pp 57-69.

⁹ Polly Toynbee, 'Feminist Chic', *What's On in London* August 4, 1978; David Ehrenstein, 'Melodrama and the New Woman' *Film Comment*

wants to be a singer) Cosmo Girl aspires to the sexual satisfaction that was connotatively denied to the 'career girl' of the '60s. Moving into the '80s, Cosmo Girl has options and makes choices. However her new subject position is potentially contradictory, retaining femininity, while moving into traditionally masculine modes (alert, aggressive, ambitious). There is thus a constant tension in the way she must always already be desirable (feminine), as well as desiring.⁵

This type of contradiction is particularly noticeable in 'post-feminist' advertising for products aimed at women: Virginia Slims cigarettes, Pretty Polly tights, Lovable underwear⁶, or the advertisements for tea recently run in British women's magazines. The slogan 'Meet the new tea lady' addresses the change by making explicit reference to old feminine stereotypes and recognising the new woman. The new tea lady almost dresses like a man – dark suit, white shirt and tie. But hers is a knickerbocker suit, and the lounging cross-legged posture, shot from a high angle, functions to foreground the signifiers of classically sexy femininity – black stockings and red nail varnish. The woman is nearly pouting, and looking out of the photograph at an angle. She has neither the downcast eyes of the passively waiting female, nor the directly challenging stare and open mouth of the come-on. Aggressively ignoring the spectator, the new tea lady breaks with tradition. But the camera angle, and her positioning within both the chair and the foreground of the image, produces her – despite her crossed legs – as open to our penetrative gaze. This penetration is supported by the depth of field and the strongly patterned floor, which, colour matching her chair, takes our gaze both further into the image and back again to her.

The new tea lady of 1982 is more assured and aggressive than the heroines of the '70s films. Iconographically she is post-punk, and thus the way she looks is not naturalistic. She is more clearly constructed, more put-together, than the '70s heroines. As Sue Clayton has observed, '70s Hollywood heroines were, at some level, offered as representations of 'real' – natural as opposed to Hollywood – women.⁷ However I think some of the same sexual contradictions can be seen at work in these films, exemplified in this discussion by *An Unmarried Woman*⁸.

Two major criticisms were made of *An Unmarried Woman* when it appeared in 1978. Firstly that the film, with its upper-middle class setting, trafficked in a type of feminist chic, which made visible some of the concerns of the Women's Movement, but trivialised or caricatured them, thus deflecting their political force⁹. Secondly, that with the appearance of Alan Bates, the film degenerated into romanticism. Obviously, the two criticisms are related, the appearance of Alan Bates usually functioning as the last straw. On both counts, the film stands accused of failing to represent 'real women'.

This paper engages only marginally with the class position of the first criticism. (The attendant element of this argument, concerning the 'unrealistic' attractiveness of Jill Clayburgh, is addressed in section two below.) I would argue that the upperclass milieu of the fiction does not of itself necessarily lead to a trivialising of feminist concerns¹⁰, although it

does contravene conventions of 'social extensiveness'¹¹ associated historically with realism. However, perhaps more significantly, it does point to the way in which Cosmo Girl originates within the concerns of the Women's Movement, the extent to which much feminism is not explicitly anti-capitalist. As Elizabeth Cagan has argued, there is a place for 'the new woman' within capitalist social relations, even if this place is contradictory for patriarchal discourses.¹² It is significant that *An Unmarried Woman*, like most of these films, seeks to address the problem of how to live 'new' femininity in isolation from questions of class and ethnicity through its choice of an 'unmarked' – white, middle-class – protagonist.¹³ More generally, however, it is clear that the film is not a sexual political manifesto, nor is it made within a documentary realist tradition. It also fails to analyse the power at stake in male/female relationships. But as a successful film, it seems of interest precisely because of the way in which it constructs femininity, sex, romance and marriage as narratively meaningful.¹⁴

The question of the 'descent' into romanticism is considered in detail in section three. Many of the critics concerned point to the heritage of the woman's picture and the melodrama. The film itself rather coyly makes this connection in the 'Where are all the wonderful women?' (Joan Crawford, Bette Davis) scene. However, instead of functioning dismissively, the reference to romantic fictions should surely be inflected to ask how, historically, romantic fictions can be understood to relate to women's subordination, and what readings it is possible to make of the particular romantic element of this film? I would argue that *An Unmarried Woman* attempts to 'make sense' of contemporary heterosexual relationships by separating out marriage (Martin), sexual practice (Charlie) and romance (Saul); that the move to the closure of romance is made explicitly fictional; that this closure cannot be completed because of the critique of marriage; and that the ambiguity of the film's ending is necessitated by the failure to interrogate the power relations of heterosexuality which subtend marriage, sexual practice and romance.

I. An 'Unmarried' Woman

An Unmarried Woman offers, as its title, the description of a woman in relation to the central heterosexual institution of marriage. This, we might assume, is a film about a woman who is not married. The derogatory cultural term, with its connotations of 'not-having-been-able-to-get-married', is spinster – or even old maid. So the more neutral 'unmarried' seems immediately to suggest either that this is a position of choice, or that there is still 'hope'.

The film opens, however, with the representation of a marriage and, I would argue, a marriage that is represented as 'good'. This much is signified by finding time for 'a quickie' after jogging (and an argument), and before work. Similarly, the daughter is shown to be at ease with her parents' sexual pleasure – 'Did the earth move?' she asks casually as she

September-October 1978, vol 14 no 5, pp 59-62. Todd Gitlin and Carol Wolman, 'An Unmarried Woman', *Film Quarterly* Fall 1978, vol 32 no 1, pp 55-58.

¹⁰ I would understand women's subordination as an oppression constituted around a gender category which is complexly articulated with categories of class and ethnicity. Michèle Barratt provides a useful discussion in *Women's Oppression Today*, London, Verso, 1980, as does Rosalind Coward, 'Socialism, Feminism and Socialist Feminism', *Gay Left* 1980, no 10, pp 8-11.

¹¹ See Raymond Williams 'A lecture on Realism' *Screen* Spring 1977, vol 18 no 1, pp 61-74.

¹² Elizabeth Cagan, 'The Selling of the Women's Movement', *Social Policy*, May/June 1978, vol 8, pp 4-12.

¹³ *Norma Rae* is the obvious exception here.

¹⁴ See Cowie *op cit* for an attack on the notion of the

'progressive' text, and Don Macpherson and Judith Williamson, 'A sense of outrage', *Time Out*, February 20-26 1981, no 566, pp 14-15, for a discussion of 'repressive' film criticism.

comes in to find her mother looking sexually satisfied on the bed (in a series of shots in which her naked thighs are always in frame), as her father dresses. A later scene, set in the evening of the same day, again shows the wife, Erica (Jill Clayburgh), as desirable to her husband, although at this point, when she has come in from seeing her 'club', she initially resists sex. Thus we have the primary establishment of the Jill Clayburgh figure as a woman who is desired, and furthermore, as a woman who can be sexually satisfied by her husband. This initiates the central mode of differentiation of this character from all the other female characters in the film.

So this movie, as becomes clear when Martin (Michael Murphy) tells Erica that he has fallen in love with someone else, is about reluctantly becoming unmarried. Its heroine, unlike that of say, *Girlfriends* or *Looking for Mr Goodbar*, is not someone who is unmarried, who might be unwanted. The unhappiness of being unmarried is thus initially contrasted with the happiness, the normality, of being married. Furthermore, as it is Martin who rejects Erica, the disruption that initiates the narrative – Erica's voyage of self-discovery – is produced through masculine activity. Thus, although in the central part of the film, Erica has to consider initiating sexual activity, this independence has been thrust upon her. She is presented initially as both desirable, satisfiable and passive – a victim.

I want later to argue that the film is partly interesting because its representation of heterosexual relations does involve a shift, a marginalisation of marriage, but here want to stress that the construction of this 'independent woman' heroine as both 'desirable' and 'OK', as opposed to 'desirable but dangerous'¹⁵, or 'desirable but a mess', which is the condition of the credibility of this later shift, is achieved primarily through the introduction of the character as a *dependent* woman. So although the film does, to some extent, offer us representations of the oppression for a woman of being single (both available to all men, and socially illegitimate) in a couple dominated world (the doctor's pass; the blind date; going to a bar by herself) the poignancy of the representation is founded on these experiences being exceptional for Erica. She has been constructed as both normal cinematically (she is an object of desire, and she does not initiate action¹⁶) and normal ideologically – happily married.

It is within the play of these two forms of normality that we can most usefully situate *An Unmarried Woman*. For if, as I have argued, the introduction of Erica as married (possessed) is necessary to a representation of her as 'normal' (sexual, but not dangerous, threatening or neurotic), at the same time, by the same movement, Erica's unmarried narratively legitimates the cynical tone of the film's discourses on marriage. Before the break-up this is represented by the Club, and Patti's taxing question to her mother: 'Name three (happily married couples)'. Following the break-up, Erica too can criticise her marriage – for it was a condition of ignorance, she did not *know* she was about to 'join the crowd'. She tells Martin that she was his hooker, displays anger about her sex life with her therapist (never expanded on), and discusses

¹⁵ Pam Cook and Claire Johnston, 'The Place of Women in the Cinema of Raoul Walsh', in *Raoul Walsh*, ed Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, British Film Institute, London, 1974, discuss the 'danger' of the sexual woman, as do several of the essays in *Woman and Film Noir*, ed E. Ann Kaplan, British Film Institute, London 1978. Theresa in *Goodbar* would be an example of a character who is 'desirable but a mess'. Julia in *Julia*, a competent, political woman, is mainly off-screen and progressively physically mutilated as the film progresses.

¹⁶ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 6-18.

with Saul the problem of always having been 'Erica and Martin'. When Jean, an artist (not normal), expresses surprise at Erica's separation: 'You seemed so normal,' Erica responds 'It's only the normal people who get divorced nowadays. No one else bothers to get married.' So the 'problem' of the film is marriage, not heterosexual relations. We have a shift in the institutional configuration of the ideological field or problematic of heterosexuality. Marriage is no longer central, although femininity remains a condition which is 'neurotic' if uncoupled. And it is this concern with a 'contemporary' heterosexuality which I wish to consider, firstly in the construction of the heroine, and then in the appearance of the hero, late in the narrative.

II. The Construction of the Heroine

The difficulty for the 'independent woman' film lies partly in constructing female characters who can plausibly do, as well as be done to and looked at. A difficulty because this is not the traditional mode for the representation of femininity, and so a femininity with the attribute of competence outside certain limited spheres is perceived as deviant or abnormal.¹⁷ I have already stressed the importance of Erica's marriage – the normal femininity of being possessed – within the narrative. I now want to go on to argue that it is the construction of this character as cinematically 'feminine' – to be looked at, a legitimate site of visual pleasure for the audience¹⁸ – which produces her within the narrative as successful in her search, a suitable mate for Saul.

Erica's 'Swan Lake solo' is exemplary, and appearing very early in the film, functions importantly in the construction of this character. Minimally, the scene has two functions. Firstly, to present Erica to us as 'subject' – active, desiring agent – and secondly, as spectacle, as object of our gaze. The sequence opens with a close-up on Erica's face as she leans back on bed pillows, the camera to her left, in a position which has shown both Patti and Martin bend down to kiss her. The camera has in fact moved into close-up on Martin kissing Erica goodbye, remaining on her face as he leaves the frame, and holds on her, with closed eyes and a dreamy smile. This moment of transition, from Erica with husband, to Erica by herself, offers punctuation before our first privileged glimpse of 'Erica for herself', but a punctuation which consists of a meditation on Erica's contented face. As music starts, Erica begins a semi-ironic fantasy commentary on her own successful debut dancing the lead in *Swan Lake*. The substance of this privileged view into the central character's privacy is her fantasy of being appreciatively watched! In a change to long-shot, Erica rises, and, in the diegetic imagination of being watched, quickly and neatly adjusts her bikini knickers to fully cover her buttocks as she begins to dance. Narratively, this is a scene which functions to give 'more depth' to the central female character – fantasising about being a ballerina, taking pleasure in her body. However, the sequence also functions quite clearly within the tradition of 'woman

¹⁷ The 'unfemininity' of the 'liberated woman' is discussed by Helen Baehr in 'The "liberated woman" in television drama' *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 1980, vol 3 no 1, pp 29-39.

¹⁸ Steve Neale, in *Genre*, British Film Institute, London, 1980, p 59 points out that Westerns, as a genre, function precisely to 'privilege, examine and celebrate the body of the male', but that the erotic component of this look is consistently rendered innocent, as part of a relay of looks at the female body. It is in this sense that I use the term 'legitimate'.

displayed as erotic spectacle'. And this is how we as audience are invited to watch, as the camera nudges round corners, or she emerges from behind a potted plant, silhouetted against the long low windows in her knickers and t-shirt¹⁹, legitimated in our gaze by Erica's own fantasy. A truly intimate voyeurism.

Intimacy and
exhibitionism: the
Swan Lake solo.



¹⁹ Although I have no space to discuss the *mise-en-scène* in class terms, I would like to comment on the mode of Erica's undress. She wears white bikini knickers, white t-shirt and long white socks at several points in the early part of the film. It is particularly the girlish socks and the whiteness of all the garments which connote a nice clean innocent (married) sexuality.

The visual pleasure of this daytime 'married' scene, which uses only three long mobile shots when Erica is dancing, can be contrasted with the later night-time 'unmarrying scene', when Erica piles her husband's possessions together onto a sort of funeral pyre. This 'unmarrying ritual', culminating in the removal of her wedding ring, is accompanied by the saxophone dominated 'mood' music ('as opposed to the 'external' ballet music of the earlier scene) which forms the sound track for all Erica's 'alone' moments. After the opening shot, the camera is mainly static, and there are frequent shot changes, with many close-ups on parts of Erica's body (face and hands), or the objects she is collecting. 'Unmarrying' produces a literal fragmentation of visual pleasure. The longer meandering shots return in the later part of the film when she is with Saul, although after meeting him, we only see her undressed very briefly.

The *Swan Lake* solo, the spectacle of a satisfied woman, is also opposed to the subsequent introduction of the 'Club', setting up the primary differentiation of Erica from her friends. Apart from her dominance of screen time, there are many other minor differences: Erica arrives later, and leaves earlier, in two of their meetings – thus constituting the other three as a group, and also allowing admiring male gazes at Erica to be shown as she arrives. She is frequently isolated in close-up – for example in the ice-skating scene, which opens on her exhilarated face. But crucially, these scenes establish a normal/abnormal axis –

²⁰ Roger Bromley 'Natural Boundaries: The Social Function of Popular Fiction', *Red Letters* 1978, no 7, pp 34-60.

Jeanette is sleeping with a nineteen year old, Elaine drinks too much and Sue tolerates her husband's infidelities to keep the marriage together – in which only Erica is normal. Kept un-neurotic by a happy marriage, displayed to the audience as an object of desire, 'the heroine' is distinguished from 'the women'.

III. The Appearance of the Hero

The introduction of the Alan Bates character two thirds of the way through the film seems to have caused most difficulty for contemporary reviewers. Without exception, this was recognised as a 'magical' resolution in the tradition of feminine romance.²⁰ One group of critics clearly despise romance (or romantic melodrama) as a genre,

*one can only cringe with amused horror and recall Warner Brothers' romantic tosh of the '40s...*²¹

*fatally soft-centred, as becomes all too evident on the descent into romance...*²²

a genre for women at that:

*what finally is women's magazine romance...*²³

While another group (including most of the women reviewers), attack the film (and sometimes the genre) for its lack of realism:

*not fair to women who want films to deal with their real problems for a change, and not their fairy tales...*²⁴

*it's easy to choose to be independent for just so long as the choice is yours... and Mr Bates will be delighted to greet you in Vermont tomorrow...*²⁵

*it might be argued that not every deserted wife can expect the chance to turn down an Alan Bates...*²⁶

The first group of critics display a sense of betrayal in the plausibility of the narrative as it moves towards its close. This is perhaps partly informed by what I have termed the generic instability of this whole group of 'independent women' films, and is thus a difficulty which would not have occurred in the viewing of a '40s 'weepie', generically marked by fatal coincidence and dramatic plot reversal. The 'realist' critics would presumably have raised similar criticisms of earlier Hollywood woman's pictures. However in relation to the perceived 'failure' of the film at this point to both groups of critics, it seems relevant to consider the introduction of Saul Kaplan in relation to some of the work that has been done on 'happy endings' in melodrama²⁷. Crudely, does the happy ending (qualified in this case) 'make the aporia more apparent'?²⁸

²¹ Geoff Brown, *Financial Times*, August 11, 1975.

²² Patrick Gibbs, *Daily Telegraph*, May 25, 1978.

²³ David Robinson, *The Times*, August 11, 1978.

²⁴ Gavin Millar, *The Listener*, August 17, 1978.

²⁵ Polly Toynbee op cit.

²⁶ Ted Whitehead, *The Spectator*, July 19, 1978.

²⁷ Jon Halliday, *Sirk on Sirk* London, Secker & Warburg, 1971; 'Dossier on Melodrama' *Screen* Summer 1977, vol 18 no 2, pp 105-119; Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', *Monogram* 1972, no 4; Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', *Movie* 1977, no 25, pp 53-57.

²⁸ This is not to suggest that the 'cracks and fissures' visible to us now in the reading of a 1950s melodrama tell us much about its putative 'ideological effectivity' in the decade. However this critical work has opened up the study of melodrama.

Impossible romance:
Erica and the 'rare'
Saul.



An Unmarried Woman is structurally similar to *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* in the delayed introduction of a big-name male star. In both cases the delay allows the heroine the experience of romance – free sex and thus offers a definition of independence as the occupying of what is usually a masculine position. As Erica says: 'I'm a short-term guy.' 'Plausibility' is not a problem in each of these encounters. However, the melodramatic coincidence of the meetings with the male star – Saul is an artist, and Erica *does* work in an art gallery, just as Kris Kristofferson ate in the cafe where Alice waited tables – is partly dependent on extra-textual knowledge of Alan Bates and Kris Kristofferson as stars. We know that Kris Kristofferson is not just going to drink his coffee and leave, nor Alan Bates just drop into the gallery to hang his paintings. And this knowledge, even if limited to reading the credits at the beginning of each film, can affect an understanding of the nature (and permanency) of Erica's distress. She may be unhappy (manless) now, but . . .

There is a certain amount of play in the introduction of Saul, with a long shot which starts very close to a painted canvas, pulls backward some distance, and then seems to be located as the point of view of an as yet unfamiliar male character who appears in frame on the right, walking backwards at about the same pace as the camera. It is only after 'looking with his eyes' that the backview figure is shown, as the camera pans round, to be Alan Bates. So the shot ends with Alan Bates, Erica and another man in frame, all standing looking at the canvas on which the shot started, the diegetic space having been established. The next shot, a mid-shot of Saul against a completely plain white background, immediately seems to remove him from diegetic space. As Elaine, who also makes the most cynical comments about men throughout the film, later observes to Erica: 'You know how rare a man like Saul is . . .'. The film 'embodies' this rarity – acceptable masculinity – rather literally through the choice of a 'quality' British star, who, to the extent that he is playing a famous British painter within the fiction, is made doubly exceptional.

This is accentuated in this second shot – the ‘portrait-like’ framing of Alan Bates, isolated, immediately after his introduction into the narrative, as if marking the ‘non-realism’ of his arrival, swopping star-image for narrative involvement. Thus it seems possible to argue that the late introduction of the romantic hero, the way in which he is introduced, and the type of character he is playing, all work together to emphasise the ‘fictiveness’ of the narrative – and to accentuate the device of this potentially happy ending – rendering its romance transparent, and hence to some degree, recognising its ‘impossibility’.

After the introduction of Saul, however, the self-consciousness of the film’s concern with romance seems to fade until the ending, where it reappears narratively as Erica’s dilemma. By the end of the film – and to an extent by the time she meets Saul – Erica has become modern as well as being normal. She has had sexual relationships outside marriage, but has not degenerated to the level of her women friends, nor become lesbian like her therapist. She too is exceptional, and thus she and Saul make a perfect couple. The contradictions of *Cosmo Girl* seem almost resolved. But of course, and this is what initially interested me about the film, Erica chooses not to go to Vermont with Saul. This refusal seems again to flirt with the analysis of the impossibility of romance which is played with in the introduction of Saul. The film does seem to recognise the contradiction between its story, Erica’s odyssey of self-discovery, and what is implicit in its potential ending of a return to coupledness. However, as none of the terms in play have been shifted – masculinity and femininity have been ultimately constructed in ‘old’ modes in new situations – the film can’t do anything with this recognition.

The final image of *An Unmarried Woman* is ambiguous – or perhaps more accurately, a double-bind. Erica half teetering, half-blown down a New York street, out of control because of Saul’s surprise goodbye gift of a huge painting. She doesn’t go to Vermont for the summer with him – she doesn’t give in, but on the other hand, she is practically immobilised.

It is possible to read this image in other ways (as a metaphor for painful steps to independence etc.) but I want to conclude by stressing the semi-paralysis of the end of this fiction. For although the film has produced a marginalisation of marriage which makes it impossible for Erica to go with Saul, to be his, the construction of Erica makes it difficult for her to *do* anything else. In the same way that the film is supremely ambiguous in its sexual politics – criticising the institution of marriage and taking the ‘impossibility’ of romance seriously, yet constructing an unmarried woman who signally fails to do anything but find another man – so the image seems to represent Erica choosing independence, but at the same time shows her made impotent by a male gift.

Jane Clarke and I have previously written on ‘independent women’ films together, in ‘The Big Frame’, *Red Rag* 12, 1980. This article is a reworked version of a paper given at the 1981 Conference of the Society for Cinema Studies in New York, and I should like to thank the organisers, and particularly Ann Kaplan for asking me to participate. Thanks also to Jane Clarke, Pam Cook, Richard Dyer, Minna Thornton and Janice Winship, who have all commented and helped at various stages.

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A SUBJECT FOR THE EIGHTIES

JANE CLARKE CONSIDERS A SUITABLE FILM FOR ITS CIRCUMSTANCES

IN MANY WAYS the P D James novel *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, the basis of Chris Petit's second feature, is a very suitable subject for the '80s. The British have a profitable history of producing glossy murder mysteries for stage and screen: *The Mousetrap* is enjoying its thirtieth year in the West End and the screen Agatha Christie series continues to unroll – *Murder on the Orient Express* in 1974, *Death on the Nile* in 1978, *Evil under the Sun* this year, all British productions. These stage and screen versions share a mainstream aesthetic; a celebration of period and the use of 'name' actors and actresses. As cultural productions they are a known quantity, offer familiar pleasures and are obvious choices for events like the annual Royal Command Performance.

From a relatively untried film-maker – and Chris Petit would be considered such by the commercial sector as his debut feature *Radio On* (1979) received critical but not industry recognition – a project like *Unsuitable Job* offers potential backers a track record in British film production. The sources of film production finance are probably even drier today than in the '70s (Channel 4 monies aside) because cinema attendances reached an all time low of 90 million in this country in 1981. In short, a murder mystery is less of a financial risk in the British context.¹

It appears that such considerations did influence Chris Petit in his choice of subject. In an interview in the *Guardian*² Derek Malcolm observes that '... your second feature is always the hardest, especially in a country where there is no clear framework in which to slot yourself.' Petit then elaborates on this point: 'In America Scorsese was able to make *Boxcar Brtha* for Corman after *Mean Streets*. And ten years ago I might have been able to make a Hammer movie. But what I faced a couple of years ago was simply a void. It was a uniquely depressing experience. I thought about trying an Agatha Christie, but in a different way, as Fassbinder might have contemplated, pinning the characters to

¹ *Radio On* cost £80,000 and was co-financed by the British Film Institute Production Board and Wim Wenders' Production Company Road Movies. *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* cost £775,000, raised from three sources: the National Film Finance Corporation (50%); Goldcrest Films and Television Limited – film financiers based in London (36%) and Boyd's Company – a British independent production company (14%).

² The *Guardian*, May 13 1982.

³ The casting of *Unsuitable Job* bows towards box office appeal in the choice of Billie Whitelaw as Elizabeth Leaming, but Pippa Guard makes her screen debut as the heroine.

the wall like moths. Then I came across P D James. I knew it wasn't exactly my kind of thing, but I thought I could do something with the story.'

Many film critics have been quick to point out that Petit is himself a critic turned director. In fact one of the most consistent components in the embryonic construction of Petit as auteur has been that he knows about film (like the *Cahiers* writers turned New Wave directors) and is therefore well placed to take a stand on form and to comment on this peculiarly British form of cultural production—the country house mystery.

The James novel is also a suitable subject for the '80s on another front—the central protagonist is a young woman doing 'a man's job'. The novel raises a number of issues pertinent to contemporary feminist concerns while also offering a film-maker the potential for an intriguing new look at a well established genre. What Petit makes of the woman as detective I want to discuss later. My point is that *Unsuitable Job* is a calculated choice of subject, and that in the '80s independent film-makers are having to make these calculations. There is increasing pressure on the independent sector to go commercial.

The British Film Institute Production Board, a major producer of independent films in this country, has in recent years been moving towards larger budget feature length films, employing known actors and actresses (Julie Christie in the forthcoming *Gold*, Janet Suzman in *The Draughtsman's Contract*).³ A theatrical release is being sought for both films. The search for wider audiences for independent cinema is on and *Unsuitable Job* shares this aspiration as well as a desire to distance itself from mainstream British productions of the Agatha Christie type. This poses the film an interesting dilemma, a productive confrontation. I want to approach the film itself, as it has emerged from these economic and cultural constraints, from two angles. The first is to look at the changes Petit and his scriptwriters have made to the source material and what these do to the heroine Cordelia Gray. The second is to sketch in the perverse sexual mapping of the film's fictional world.

In P D James' novel Cordelia Gray is hired by a renowned scientist Callender to investigate the motives behind the suicide by hanging of his 21-year-old son Mark. Cordelia becomes convinced that Mark was murdered and resolves to find his killer. A fair amount of detection goes on in the novel, and Cordelia is shown to be proficient at her job. She interviews Mark's friends, traces a former nanny through a wreath sent to Mark's funeral and builds up a picture of possible suspects. She's quick to notice that Miss Leaming, Callender's personal secretary, quotes in full a passage from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, whereas the suicide note left by Mark contained only a fragment of the poem. Did Miss Leaming fake the note?

The novel's Cordelia Gray initiates a series of discoveries. Her work is conducted methodically, with only occasional resorts to intuition. She has a vocation for detection. This is *not* how Cordelia's execution of her job is represented in the film. There all her advances in knowledge are the result of accidental or arbitrary events:

1. She stumbles over a defaced photograph in the cottage garden.
2. She finds matching photographs in the Callender family home, not because she's searching for clues but because she's looking for a towel to dry her hands.
3. A lipstick falls from the pocket of Callender's dinner suit jacket. It matches the lipstick which was smeared over Mark's face when his body was found.
4. Cordelia chases some unruly children from the cottage garden and discovers, in their tree house, more photographs and the crucial prayer-book which will reveal that Mark had a different blood group from that of his alleged mother, Callender's wife. In the novel Cordelia is led to the significance of the prayer-book through a series of deductions.
5. Cordelia realises that the cryptic message in the prayer-book refers to blood groups because of a stray remark by another character. In the novel she works it out as the only possible meaning.

There are other, more radical, differences between the novel and the film, but all these changes affect the central character's relationship to knowledge. This is a relationship which is of great importance in the detective thriller, more so than in any other genre, because it is the search for knowledge which underpins its narratives. Most mainstream detective films open with an enigma that must be solved. The viewer and the (usually male) detective are both in the dark but the detective embodies a potential relationship to knowledge. The movement of the narrative entails a gradual increase in knowledge which the detective and the spectator usually gain hand in hand. The narrative is driven forward by this quest and when knowledge is complete the story is at an end. The matching of detective and audience point of view gives the audience a stable reference point in an unstable and disturbing film world where unexplained murders can take place.

But *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* lacks this sense of narrative logic because Cordelia's relationship to knowledge is always unstable. The film is neither centred on her acquisition of information nor driven forward by her quest. She is rarely in control of the knowledge she has gained, and most of it she has gained accidentally. One discovery does not lead to the next. This development in the detective thriller disturbs our genre expectations. Petit re-works the conventions of a classic film form which he simultaneously invokes. The *mise-en-scène* of detection is offered to us in the early scene in Cordelia's seedy office where Venetian blinds cast film noir shadows across her desk – a vision which conjures up our collective cinematic experience. Significantly, it is in this scene that Cordelia takes up the tools of her trade – the revolver and tape recorder which have just been bequeathed to her by her dead partner Bernie Pryde. And the enigma she has to solve will revolve around another legacy.

Mark Callender was about to come into his mother's ample fortune when his untimely death diverted the funds to his father. So we have parallel cases of perverse inheritance: Cordelia inherits Bernie's tools of power and knowledge, and Callender the father benefits from the death of his son. (The choice of Paul Freeman to play Callender is ominous as

he is best known for his role as the Nazi archaeologist Belloq in Spielberg's *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* (1981) and he will be revealed as the villain of this piece.) In the film Cordelia's stepping into Bernie's place is depicted as an unnatural act. It will catch her up in a structure of relationships she cannot fully comprehend or affect. The power lies in the relationship between Callender father and son—a relationship she will always stand outside despite her inheritance of Bernie's tools. She is displaced by the Oedipal scenario.

These sexual political implications were picked up by Alexander Walker in his review in the *New Standard*⁴:

An Unsuitable Job for a Woman is nothing of the sort. For a crime that needs intuition to solve it, not deduction, a woman is perfectly suitable. Is my male chauvinism showing? Perhaps: but a film that calls attention to its chief character's gender invites scrutiny on that score. And it's not often a private eye is female. Poirot's little grey cells aren't much on tap in Christopher Petit's adaptation of Miss P D James' detective mystery. . . . Masculine logic can take a rest. Heart wins over head in the solution – and damn the need actually to prove the case. So far, so womanly.

Walker is quick to generalise from this one representation of a woman to a universal notion of the 'womanly', but he does have a point when he writes that 'a film that calls attention to its chief character's gender invites scrutiny on that score'. Most of us will be looking to see how a woman will make out in this 'male profession', but in this version the title loses its ironic meaning.

Should we mourn the loss of P D James' positive heroine? The film takes off from a fairly conventional story but is less interested in supplying a strong narrative drive than in establishing atmosphere – frequently through its allusions to other films. Martin Schafer's shady but luminous cinematography (criticised in many reviews for being too dark and murky) helps to create the film's noir world where appearances are deceptive (the distinguished Callender is a killer; the steely Miss Leaming hides tender feelings for her illegitimate child Mark); where sexuality is murderous; where the random, the arbitrary and the accidental are potent forces. Major ellipses are introduced into the novel's cause and effect trajectory, the sources of information are impossible to predict and no strong point of view structure is centred in the main protagonist. This unsettling of the narrative is not without purpose, however, as the film does pursue one important aspect of the P D James' novel: the detective falls in love with the corpse.

Cordelia Gray becomes obsessed with the dead Mark Callender in both novel and film. There is a famous filmic precedent here. In Preminger's *Laura* (1945) Dana Andrews plays a detective sent to investigate the brutal murder of a beautiful young woman. He lives in her apartment, fingers her clothes, sleeps in front of her portrait. (Aspects of this scenario are repeated in Burt Reynold's recent *Sharky's Machine*.) Finally the heroine comes to live for Andrews in an ending which continues to perturb film scholars.



Dangerous identification: Cordelia's obsession with Mark leads to a re-enactment of his hanging.

Cordelia, likewise, moves into Mark's cottage, re-enacts his hanging (nearly killing herself), wears his jumper and belt (which later saves her life). Interestingly, in this '80s version to identify with your dead victim is to become androgynous.⁵ There is a real sexual ambiguity about Cordelia. Her appearance at the film's climax is mistaken by Callender as the return of his dead son. And here the film develops a theme which is at most implicit in the novel – the father's perverse desire for his son. Ultimately we learn that it is Callender who has murdered Mark, dressed his corpse in women's black underwear and smeared his face with lipstick. He has also bedded Mark's double, Cordelia.

This is a highly significant addition to the novel, where no physical relation occurs. Cordelia's explicit fascination with Mark offers a possible motivation for her desire for his father, but none is provided for Callender's interest in her until the mistaken recognition at the film's end. The love scene (such as it is) occurs very abruptly in the film. Cordelia visits Callender one night and confesses her obsession with his son. She asks to be released from the case. Cut to Cordelia naked in a large bed. She rolls over and a fully clothed Callender enters the shot. She sits up. He leans over her, not lovingly as one expects, but to grab her by the throat as he demands to know what she has discovered about Mark's death. This is the second suggestive linking of eroticism and pain in the film: it is

⁵ This sense of confusing resemblance is enhanced by the casting of Pippa's cousins Alex and Dominic Guard as Mark Callender and Andrew Lunn respectively.



Eroticism and pain: Callender attacks Cordelia in a moment of post-coital violence.

prefigured by the dressing of Mark's corpse in drag, suggesting an erotic component to his death by hanging.

The third time this connection is made is during the scene in the well which occurs as the film builds to its climax. Cordelia has discovered the discrepancy in blood groups between Mark and his alleged mother, and she returns to the cottage to await an explanation from Miss Leaming. Instead, an unseen assailant attacks her and throws her down the well in the garden. In a long held scene we watch her painful climb up the deep well shaft. The climb takes enormous effort on her part and she moans and gasps with pain as she inches up the brick tunnel. This entire scene is shot tightly down the well centring in on Cordelia. We see her shirt sticking to her body, the drops of sweat and water on her face. She falls back once and has to climb up again. I was strongly reminded of the sequence in *Alien* (1979) in which Sigourney Weaver crawls through the tunnels of her devastated spaceship in her bid to escape the murderous intruder. In both sequences the woman is shown as brave, resourceful and with an extraordinary will to live. At the same time both are offered up as erotic spectacle. The image of the woman in danger and pain, straining to reach safety, is eroticised through the tight framing of her body. An excitement is generated from her fear.



Eroticism and pain: Cordelia strains for safety in her spectacular climb from the well.

How else could the scene in the well have been shot? After all it is a pivotal moment in the James novel and had to be somehow included in the narrative. My argument is that the incident is given a visual prominence through its framing and duration. In the novel Cordelia is strong in her pursuit of knowledge *and* in her physical resourcefulness. Here the film dwells on a strong side of Cordelia—her difficult climb, her refusal to die—because this strength is amenable to a visual eroticisation in a way her search for knowledge is not.

After the strong sexual charge of this scene the film hurries to its climax. Cordelia escapes from the well and pursues her assailant, revealed as Andrew Lunn—Callender's beloved assistant and surrogate son. In a tense car chase Cordelia forces Lunn the usurper off the road and into the river. Lunn's death by drowning (which avenges Mark's death by hanging) is prefigured in his first encounter with Cordelia. She asks to see Mark's former room, which Lunn now inhabits, and he nervously knocks a toy car into the fish tank. Callender is distraught at Lunn's death and for Cordelia vengeance is complete—justice has been done. But the film doesn't end here. The structure of its relationships exceeds Cordelia's grasp and effectivity.

Callender has to die. The instrument of his death is Bernie Pryde's

gun but it is Miss Leaming—mother of illegitimate Mark and illicit mistress of Callender—who pulls the trigger. Miss Leaming steps in here as the phallic mother who must kill the father who has overstepped the limits of parental power. There is also an implication that theirs was an unholy union. (*A Marriage of Heaven and Hell?*) As a daughter, Cordelia could never have achieved full knowledge and she is displaced from this final overthrow of the evil father Callender....

An Unsuitable Job for a Woman negotiates a number of contemporary concerns and constraints: *financial*—the problems of financing second features in the UK; *cinematic*—the recent interest in generic re-workings of classic noir scenarios evidenced by *Body Heat* (1981) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981); *political*—the creation of a differentiated feminist audience interested in representations of women; and *national*—the 'British' legacy of the Agatha Christie blockbuster. Without tying these factors neatly into a wholly conjunctural package, it's worth considering how they contributed to narrowing the film's focus to the murderous sexual relationships of a propertied English family. In its desire to rattle skeletons in the country house cupboard the film has to forfeit the novel's heroine as a controlling protagonist. Cordelia becomes a site of perverse eroticism and incomplete knowledge, but to dismiss *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* because she is not represented as a clearly positive heroine is to ignore the film's contradictory fascinations.

September

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MASCULINITY IN CRISIS?

PAM COOK ON TRAGEDY AND IDENTIFICATION IN 'RAGING BULL'

A GREAT DEAL has been written about *Raging Bull*. It has found a place as one of the classics of New Hollywood cinema, and if that sounds like a contradiction in terms, we have only to think of the number of films in Hollywood's 'New Wave' which consciously trade on their own past, calling up classic Hollywood's golden moments as a way of getting us into the cinema; no mean feat, these days. With the traditional system of production, distribution and exhibition of films in rapid decline, nostalgia and anxiety about the past from New Hollywood is understandable, though not inevitable. Looking back is fundamental to *Raging Bull*, and to the disturbing pleasures it offers. The decline and fall of its hero, Jake La Motta, provides a pretext for the playing out of a number of anxieties about the irrecoverability of the past. His collapse into impotence is the mainspring of a scenario which evokes profound loss: loss of a great classic cinema, of community values, of family life, of individual energy... A tragic scenario in which the hero's suffering teaches us something about our own life, and how to accept its terms.

My own cinéphiliac obsession with the film is far from exhausted, and probably never will be. These notes are not an attempt to exorcise my pleasure, or anybody else's, as much left criticism of Hollywood does, nor do I simply want to confirm it. What interests me is the film's appeal to some feminists, who have seen in its explicit representation of violence as a masculine social disease a radical critique of masculinity. While I agree that *Raging Bull* puts masculinity in crisis, I don't think it offers a radical critique of either masculinity or violence, even though it is profoundly disturbing. The film's attitude to violence is ambiguous. On one hand, it is validated as an essential component of masculinity, making possible resistance to a corrupt and repressive social system. On this level violence is seen as inseparable from desire, and is celebrated. On the other, the tragic scenario of *Raging Bull* demands that the hero be shown to be the guilty victim of his transgressive desires: his violence is so excessive, so self-destructive that it has to be condemned. This moralism, combined with the film's nostalgia for traditional family values, produces a condemnation of violence which comes close to that of the Right. Moreover, I would argue that the tragic structure of *Raging Bull*

has consequences for its view of masculinity: masculinity is put into crisis so that we can mourn its loss. I believe my pleasures in the film are traditional, and I want to mobilise some of them in the interests of contributing to feminist debate. Must we always justify our pleasure, our fantasies, as 'progressive', or condemn them as 'reactionary'? I'd rather see them non-moralistically as fertile ground for discussion of the more difficult and painful aspects of our desires in relation to our politics. *Raging Bull* propels us into that arena.

Pleasure: Cinéphilie

Like all New Hollywood cinema, *Raging Bull* is directed at a relatively new audience of knowledgeable cinema-goers. TV has given wide exposure to cinema's history, creating a large popular audience clued-in to the pleasures of recognising authorship, genre etc. This audience coincides with an influx of producers and directors into the Hollywood industry who have college educations in cinema studies. One of the characteristics of New Hollywood that marks it off from classic Hollywood is that it's produced and consumed by knowledgeable intellectuals. It sells itself on the basis of its reflexivity, calling up classic Hollywood in order to differentiate itself from it. The 'modernity' of New Hollywood lies in the way it plays on the known conventions of a past Hollywood to displace it, while retaining the pleasures of homage to the past. *Raging Bull* is a good example of New Hollywood's retrospective impulse. Director Martin Scorsese is known as a cinéophile. His anxiety about preserving the cinema's past is manifested in his preservation of his work in the Scorsese Archives, and one of his reasons for filming *Raging Bull* in black and white (besides as a conscious reference to Warner Brothers films of the '40s) was as a protest against the deterioration of colour values. The film, which has a minimal story line, is a complex tapestry of allusions in image and sound to a lost popular culture. It offers a challenge to the curiosity and the critical acumen of the cinéophile spectator, a come-on to those of us who are hooked on cinema. Jake La Motta's life brushes against the history of cinema and popular music at certain moments, drawing us in like a puzzle to a game we can never win.

(Losing the game is crucial to *Raging Bull*: Scorsese has said that he wanted to differentiate the film from contemporary boxing pics in which the hero wins through (e.g. *Rocky II*) by presenting a hero who loses everything, who redeems himself through loss, recalling the '40s version of the genre, and returning obsessively to *On the Waterfront*, to Brando's performance as the reluctant working-class hero who becomes, *in spite of himself*, an icon of working-class struggle.)

Then there is the film's visual pleasure: the excitement of a *mise-en-scène* which alternates between long, reflective shots which allow us to contemplate the scene in safety, at a distance, and explosions of rapid montage which assault our eyes and ears, bringing us right into the ring with the fighters. Sometimes we almost literally get a punch in the eye. I



The moment of truth as Jake La Motta delivers the decisive blow in a scene from "Raging Bull",
a United Artists release

RB (UK) 4

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A punch in the eye: the spectator is at ringside in Jake La Motta's fight scene.

don't like boxing; but the illusion of 'being there', the risk involved, is a real turn-on. The film moves and excites by making the past immediately present, by making us present in history. For women, perhaps, this illusion of presence is doubly exciting, since we are generally represented as outside history. But the price of that pleasure is an identification with masculinity on its terms rather than our own.

Pleasure: the Body

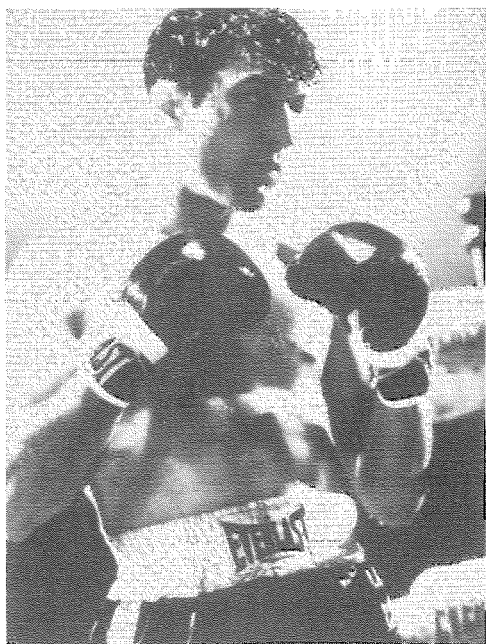
Hollywood films about sport generally centre on the male body (though not always: *Pat and Mike*, or Ida Lupino's *Hard, Fast and Beautiful*, for example) as object of desire. If, as feminist film theory has argued, classic Hollywood is dedicated to the playing out of male Oedipal anxieties across the woman's body, object of the 'male' gaze, what does it mean to place the male body at the centre?

The classic Hollywood boxing pic has a 'rise-and-fall' structure, an analogy for male sexuality itself. The working-class hero battles his way towards success against opposition from a corrupt, hostile society and his own self-doubts (John Garfield in *Body and Soul*). The Championship is rarely an end in itself: it represents winning the game against society, becoming a man against all the odds. Of course, the hero can lose, and he must recognise this fact in order to become a real man. The hero of boxing films, who is often too sensitive to succeed, travels a painful Oedipal journey, challenging the power of the Father, punished for the attempt. His body becomes the focus for this struggle: the desire to win, followed by punishment and loss. The boxing pic has often been used as a vehicle for left-wing ideas, and the virile working-class hero is a prevailing image in the iconography of socialist politics. For many political women it has a powerful and complex appeal: as an object of desire, as a focus for identification, and as the fulfillment of a sadistic wish to see it destroyed, to make space for our own fantasies of power, activating the desire of the mother for her child.

Raging Bull plays out this problem of class and male sexuality across the body of Robert De Niro. Much has been made of De Niro's virtuoso performance, which involved the donning of a false nose and gaining a vast amount of weight to depict Jake La Motta's decline. I suspect that the actual transformation of De Niro's body is crucial: for those of us turned on by De Niro, the 'real' loss of his beautiful body as an object for contemplation is disturbing, and undermines the sadistic desire to see that body punished and mutilated that the film activates. The loss of the actor's body, known and desired before the film existed, drawing us to the film with the promise of the pleasure of seeing it, implicates us deeply in the tragic hero's decline. Whatever power we may have thought we had, through our sadistic gaze at the bruised and battered male body, we lose through identification with the hero's loss. The pain of our loss motivates us to look back, to seek again the perfect body in all its power and beauty, as the film itself looks back nostalgically to a time

when pure animal energy formed the basis of resistance to oppression and exploitation, identifying that energy with masculine virility.

This ambiguity around the male body is not quite the same as that which surrounds the woman's body in classic Hollywood, where the active desire of the woman represents a problem which the film sets out to resolve, finally replacing her as feminine, apparently confirming the security of the power of the 'male' spectator (*The Revolt of Mamie Stover*). *Raging Bull*, like its predecessors in the boxing genre, presents the powerful male body as an object of desire and identification, but moving towards the loss of male power. This loss activates the desire to call it up once more: we mourn the loss, so the founding image of male power, the phallus, is centred yet again. The space for desire which the tragedy promises to open up—the celebration of the overthrow of the phallus—is closed off in the search for the lost object.



The desired body destroyed: Jake La Motta at the beginning and end of his tragedy.

This fixation on the male body as object of desire has consequences for the representation of the woman's body in the film. The spectator's look at De Niro/Jake is direct, unmediated desire, but our access to Vickie/Cathy Moriarty is mediated through Jake's desire for her. We see Vickie entirely through Jake's eyes, literally, as the expression of his desire for her is a prolonged eroticised gaze cut in with reverse shots of him looking at her. The effect is to deflect the spectator's access to the woman's body, confirming identification with the male hero as simultaneously desiring subject and object of desire. Vickie's body is marked out as maternal

(even though she is only fifteen) in its mature fullness, and by the fact that when Jake first sees and desires her she is with a group of the mob's henchmen, the godfathers against whom he will increasingly turn his aggression. Later in the film, a kiss exchanged between Tommy, head of the mob, and Vickie provokes Jake into a jealous rage which is as much an expression of his desire for Tommy as for her. So the film acts out a scenario in which male desire for the mother's body coincides with the wish to kill the father. Moreover, the anxieties aroused by this double transgression are displaced into male homosexual desire and the impulse to punish the mother who initiated the forbidden desire. The film constantly defers and delays Jake's sexual encounters with Vickie. The scene of their first coupling, after a long, protracted sequence, takes place in his parents' bed after they have kissed in front of a photograph of Jake and his brother Joey playfully boxing. Vickie's body is framed by Jake's look, by Joey's look, by the look of the camera in the home-movie sequence, placing her further and further at a distance, until finally she is eliminated altogether. But the maternal body returns in the film, in the language Jake uses to insult other men ('Fuck your mother,' 'Your mother takes it up the ass' . . .), curses which are homosexually turned against his opponents (Jake threatens to 'fuck the ass' of one of them).

The sexual confusion at the heart of *Raging Bull* does, I think, put masculinity in crisis, raising the question of what it takes to be a man, and what the alternatives to macho male sexuality might be. But precisely because it is a masculine crisis defined entirely in terms of male Oedipal anxieties, desire circulates always around the phallus, returning to it obsessively, blocking off other avenues, alternative expressions of male desire, in its stress on the tragic inevitability of the male Oedipal scenario.

Pleasure: Tragedy

The tragic structure of *Raging Bull* is, I think, fundamental to the way the film resolves the hero's crisis. Tragedy is an ancient dramatic form going back at least as far as Greek antiquity. History has radically transformed it since then, but it seems to retain a certain continuity of form and function: through a process of emotional release or catharsis brought about by identification with the suffering of the tragic protagonists, tragedy teaches us something about the world and our place in it. The function of tragedy remains important today, or takes on even more importance because we are living through times of great social unrest and change. Tragedy siphons off the pain and contradictions which are the consequences of that change, teaching us that when things change something may be gained, but we inevitably lose, and we should mourn that loss. Tragedy resists the progress of history, giving us a perspective on how it affects the lives of human beings caught up in it, and enabling us to see certain truths about our own lives. This means it can be mobilised politically, to ask questions about the 'positive' aspects of progress, but it can also be used to confirm our feeling that human beings are

inevitably the victims of social forces, over which they can never exert control.

As Raymond Williams points out in *Modern Tragedy*, the Christian tradition of tragedy differs from its secular forbears in two important ways. It lacks the background of a social context against which the action is played out, and it centres the dramatic struggle in an individual tragic hero rather than in ruling families or collective groups. The Christian tradition suggests that the outcome of the struggle, and the suffering of the tragic hero is inevitable, and that our attitude to this inevitability should be one of pity for the hero who suffered in our place. Tragedy moves us to tears, rather than anger or thought. The tragic hero (sometimes, but not often, a heroine: Williams' sole example is Anna Karenina) is compelled by internal and external forces outside his control to act in a way which transgresses social or moral codes, for which he is punished. Punishment and suffering are built into the tragic structure: the hero batters against his fate until he finally redeems himself by accepting it. The notion of the tragic hero suffering in our place is clearly very important to Christian mythology, and without going into the religious symbolism of Scorsese's work, the Christian version of tragedy seems relevant to *Raging Bull*: the rise and fall of Jake La Motta (a traditional narrative structure in classical Hollywood cinema) is close to that of tragedy, which deals with the fall from grace of successful, powerful men and women. However, Jake's fall is not simply a punishment for some unknown crime or guilt, which is the explanation he offers in the film at one point. He comes from the Italian-American immigrant community, and therefore has the misfortune to be caught up in the American Dream which offered success and power at the same time as it insisted on the innate inferiority of the Italian immigrants, locating them as a source of crime and corruption, and of many other un-American activities, such as political unrest. The history of the Italian immigrant community in America is littered with the martyrs of this victimisation: perhaps the most memorable examples are Sacco and Vanzetti. In this context, Jake La Motta appears as another victim-hero caught between his desire to change the conditions of his existence by becoming a champion boxer, and his powerlessness in the face of those who control those conditions. Jake's violence and animal energy are the source of both his drive for success and his resistance to exploitation, and as such they are validated. But in the tragic scenario of *Raging Bull* their social context and motivation is displaced, so that we are left with the private pain of a single individual whose suffering is caused by his innate guilt. Jake reaches rock bottom when, totally isolated from family and friends and unable to gather support from any source, he is thrown into prison on a charge of allowing teenage prostitution in his club. In prison he finally rejects the guilty self that motivated him to violence and social transgression ('I'm not that guy...'), and when we next see him he is indeed a changed man, humbler, resigned, but you might also say an empty husk.

Jake's story is about the breakdown of one man and the emergence of another. But as in all tragedy, whatever the positive value placed on

change, and Scorsese has insisted that at the end of the film La Motta has redeemed himself, the breakdown involves loss, and that loss is mourned. Jake's anger and his animal violence stood for something: a resistance to exploitation, a desire for freedom. Once the anger is gone and resignation takes its place, Jake becomes a pathetic creature, a lumbering animal looking for forgiveness. In the tragic resolution of the film we're asked to look with pity on this shell of a man who has lost all the attributes necessary to masculinity. Some of us might want to celebrate that loss (*schadenfreude*, pleasure in another's misfortunes, is built into tragedy), and there is, I think, a sadistic pleasure in the spectator's pitying look at Jake at the end of *Raging Bull*, partly explained by the space opened up for female desire when the powerful male is brought low. But, as the sister of tragedy, melodrama, tells us, there is no desire without the phallus (think of the endings of *Written on the Wind* and *All That Heaven Allows*, where the heroines are caught in the consequences of their desire to overthrow the phallus) and though we may take it up we can only do so at the expense of male castration. So where does it leave us? Our desire is folded in with man's desire for himself, and like him, we mourn the loss of masculinity.

For Scorsese, it seems, the assimilation of the Italian immigrants into American society is a negative blessing involving the loss of the integrity and the unity of that community, and the breakdown of the traditional Italian family. The film looks back to a time when those values were current, a mythic past when primitive animal instinct formed the basis of resistance to oppression and exploitation, pure energy as a principle of change. In identifying that energy with masculine virility, and in continuing to locate feminine sexuality in its traditional place within the family, as entirely maternal, it seems to me to be far from progressive, bypassing the question of female desire, denying the value of many of the changes that have taken place in the area of sexual politics, retreating into retrograde romanticism and anti-intellectualism. But it does raise crucial questions of desire, of the desires of feminist politics in relation to male desires and masculine politics, of the mobilisation of aggression and desire in the interests of politics.

These notes have emerged from a lecture on *Raging Bull* given at the National Film Theatre in a series of lunchtime lectures organised by BFI Education.

Thanks to Jane Clarke, who encouraged me to write about my pleasure in a film we both love.

'CHARIOTS OF FIRE', IMAGES OF MEN

STEVE NEALE REFLECTS ON AN
OEDIPAL OLYMPICS



The race: male bodies in motion.

CHARIOTS OF FIRE, the recent recipient of an Academy Award as 'best film' of 1981, could be discussed in a number of different ways in different contexts: for instance, the prospective effects of its unexpected success on the British film industry (all too likely to spark off yet another wave of films aimed at the American market, yet more fantasies of a *commercial* resurgence of an almost defunct British industry) or its images of race, religion, class, nationality and nationalism. Here, in the context of an issue of *Screen* devoted to Sexual Politics, I want to look at the film in terms of its representations of masculinity and the male body, an aspect which is at its central core, the determining focus around which race, religion, class and nationality are themselves articulated and

defined. Each of these issues and images cross one another, are woven as representations and discourses across a plot in many ways so perfunctory and banal, so stereotypical, as to be merely the pretext, the narrative motivation, for a constant and varied stream of images of the male body – in motion, at rest; intense, relaxed, elated, despondent; semi-naked, immaculately dressed. Such drama as *is* generated by the story and its process of narration is centred almost obsessively around an Oedipal problematic: the relationship between the son, on the one hand, and the Father (in various guises) on the other.:

Chariots of Fire opens with the words 'Let us praise famous men and our fathers that begat us', spoken in a memorial service in a church set in 1978, and with images and accompanying theme music of a group of athletes running on a beach in Kent in 1924. The athletes are watched by a man and a young boy (father and son?). As the camera moves across to show us the Carlton hotel, where the athletes are subsequently revealed to be staying before their departure to Paris for the Olympics, Aubrey Montagu's voice-over, in the form of a letter addressed to his mother, moves the story further back in time to 1919, and the arrival of Aubrey and Harold Abrahams at Cambridge. During registration, Abrahams' status as a Jew, together with the prejudice that entails, is established (as too is Abrahams' insistence that he is no longer a 'laddie'). At the Freshman's dinner, following hymn sung by the boys' choir, the master of Caius college refers to those at the college who died during the Great War: 'They died for England, and all that England stood for.' After running round the square to confound the ancient axiom that it cannot be done within the time it takes the college clock to strike twelve, Abrahams' performance is commented upon by the two watching professors: 'Perhaps they are God's children after all.' We then cut to the Highlands, where Eric Liddell is starting off a children's running race. On giving the prizes he comments in his speech upon how he was born in China, how his father had told him of the wonders of Scotland and on how 'I am and always will be a Scot.' Liddell is encouraged to run in a race himself, which he wins. He is told by the head of the mission for which he works to 'run, in God's name'. Cut back to Abrahams in his rooms at Cambridge telling Aubrey that the portrait on the wall is a portrait of his father, a man who 'worshipped this country.'

Twenty minutes or so into the film, and its themes, concerns, obsessions and repetitions are by now well established. The problems Liddell and Abrahams suffer, the basis of the film's drama, can be defined in terms of a series of potential or actual disjunctions between the instances of race, religion, nation – and the father. It is the task of the narrative to resolve these disjunctions, hence in the process to establish a stable identity for the two central characters, and hence too to find for each of them a stable image of the father.

For Liddell, the problem is one of a disjunction between God and country, dramatised in terms of his refusal to run the Olympic heats for the 100 yards on the Sabbath. Any potential disjunction between his desire to run and his love of and duty towards God is resolved both easily

and quickly. He tells his doubting sister he will go as a missionary to China, but only after he has run in the Olympics: 'God made me for China, but he also made me fast . . . When I run, I feel his pleasure. To win is to follow him.' The essential problem is presented almost literally in terms of two paternal images: that of God, on the one side, and that of the King on the other. The problem is resolved when the aristocrat Lord Lindsay offers to stand down and let Liddell run in the 400 yards in his place. Liddell can then win for God *and* King, uniting both images while lending to the latter an aura not only of glory but also of religious principle.

For Abrahams, the problem is more complex inasmuch as for him, as a Jew, religion and race are intertwined together in an equation whose other side is nation and British society, to all of which he wishes to belong and to lend his allegiance. (Although much is made early on of Liddell's identity as a Scot, race never really figures in the equation in which *he* is caught.) Abrahams refuses the terms set by the establishment for admission to its order (figured here in terms of the two old and bigoted masters of Caius and Trinity colleges). He wants a new, meritocratic, professional order, whose validity his victory at the Olympics will prove. But while preparing and training for the Olympics, at least, Abrahams must remain something of an outsider. As such, his father's image is inadequate as a point of Oedipal identification (his father 'worshipped' England, something Abrahams cannot bring himself fully to do.) His God, meanwhile, has no country, does not figure as the father of any religion recognised as belonging to the England for which he runs. His father is found instead in the figure of Massabini, his professional trainer, an outsider too not only in his status as a professional in a sport dominated by an amateur ideology, but also in race: he is part Italian, part Arab. Massabini is unable to watch Abrahams' victory. It's only on hearing the national anthem (significantly enough) that he can bring himself to whisper 'My son', and that Abrahams, meanwhile, can achieve an identity stable enough to allow him to return, relatively untroubled, to England and to devote himself fully to his actress lover, Sybil Gordon.

Liddell and Abrahams may achieve an identity and find an image of the father, but that figure has in each case to be distinguished from what Lacanian psychoanalysis has theorised as the *Name of the Father*:

The Name of the Father, which is the name without a bearer, is the index of language as a system of difference. It is the separation of the name of the father from its bearer that is the crucial event for an entry into the symbolic order, the order of language. The symbolic, for Lacan, refers to the structure of difference that constitutes the possibility of articulation. In so far as such a world is constantly open to re-articulation, the subject can only figure within it on the condition that the subject is incomplete (and therefore subject to desire). It is the recognition of a possible castration that is the inaugurating moment of the symbolic and this moment is conditional on the recognition that the father cannot bear his name, that he, too, is submitted to a symbolic order.¹

¹ Colin McCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, London, Macmillan, 1978, pp 49-50.

² *ibid*, p 108.

³ *ibid*, p 108-109.

The figure of the father in *Chariots of Fire*, by contrast, is very much a source of identification rather than an index of the symbolic and, hence, of insatiable desire. As such this figure, and the relationship of the two 'sons' to it, is firmly caught in the second stage of a three stage Oedipal process. In the first, the male child is in a position of dependence vis-à-vis the mother, constantly attempting to fit himself to her desires. The child's concern is to conform to her demand. In the second, the recognition of sexual difference offers a solution to the riddle perplexing the child from birth: he is loved because he has the phallus the mother lacks,

*But simultaneously, in a logically distinct moment, he recognises that the mother's desires are organised in terms of the father who is understood as a rival phallus. If the mother is now understood to be fundamentally lacking in her being (thus her love for the child and the father), the father is understood as a full presence. As the father is without lack (he is the phallus incarnate), he functions as the cause of his own desire. The element of hate enters when the child realises, in a third stage, that the father is also articulated within an organisation of desire that he does not control. The father is not the full presence that he promised to be; he, too, is lacking in his being.*²

As MacCabe goes on to argue, this third stage

*remains for us, caught in a patriarchal society, only a partially realised possibility. All the efforts of society are devoted to encouraging as complete a regression to the second stage as is conformable with sanity.*³

In other words, masculine authority is invested with and produced by an image of the father as possessor of the phallus, as source of his own desire. It is *this* image with which *Chariots of Fire* is concerned. It is *this* image with which Liddell and Abrahams seek to identify as a mark both of the resolution of their Oedipal dramas and of the consequent establishment of their masculine identity. It's no wonder that such female characters as exist in the film, notably Sybil and Jenny, Liddell's sister, tend to be marginal to the drama (or that the figure of the mother is present only in the verbal address of Aubrey's letters). Jenny figures largely as an image of religious rectitude, of desire subordinated totally to the phallic authority of her God. Sybil, meanwhile, seems solely to function as the means by which Abrahams is marked for the audience as both subject and object of desire. Object more than subject, however, for Abrahams' desire is by no means directed solely at her. Like the other men in the film, his desire is represented ultimately in terms of his running, the exercising of his body in a contest with other men. Insofar as this is the case, the images and sequences which represent that running, repeated as they are across the span of the narrative, both indicate and represent a desire which I think figures also in a number of other repeated (and perhaps largely more symptomatic) textual motifs.

Nearly all these motifs centre on the act of looking, situating that act within a series of contexts which variously link together looking itself, the male body as the object of the look, the male as subject of the look,

the Oedipal figure of father and son, and the act of running as that which simultaneously embodies and incites male desire. The first instance of the first of these motifs occurs in the credit sequence. The running on the beach is watched by a man and a young boy. This Oedipal context, the placing of the act of looking under the sign of the father-son relationship, continues most notably with the watching of Abrahams running round the square by the masters of Caius and Trinity; the watching of Liddell running against the French by Massabini; the subsequent sequence in which Abrahams asks Massabini to act as his trainer (Massabini agrees eventually to come and see him run: 'So you will watch me.' The whole sequence quite explicitly marks the relationship between them in terms of a repressed erotic desire. Massabini tells Abrahams that it is he who should do the asking: 'Are you married, Mr Abrahams? . . . How would you feel if she popped the question?'); the cross cut sequence in which Abrahams, watched by Massabini, practices shortening his stride length while Liddell trains in the Scottish hills watched through binoculars by *his* trainer, Sandy McGrath; the watching of the final Olympic races themselves by Lord Birkenhead and the Prince of Wales. In these instances, running is marked as representing a desire oriented around the image of the father—phallic authority, the object of male identification.

A second motif links running, looking and the male body across instances of the look, not of the father, but of other young men, other athletes, real or potential rivals for the father's love. In the sequence in which Massabini comes to watch Liddell's race against the French, his look at Liddell running is intercut with Abrahams' look, Abrahams having come to the meeting to watch Liddell for the first time too. Before the heats in Paris, Abrahams, Aubrey Montagu and the others are shown watching a newsreel of their American rivals, Paddock and Scholtz, in action (a sequence followed by extended images of the American athletes training, running and exercising *for us*). At the end of Abrahams' victory in the 100 yards, one particular shot quite explicitly links Liddell and Abrahams across the instance of looking, as Abrahams poses for a photograph while Liddell crosses the frame in slow-motion to offer him his congratulations. When Liddell wins, a close-up of Abrahams watching him cross the tape is superimposed over the image of Liddell himself.

This particular motif is far from exhausted by these examples, for there is another set of images and sequences, involving the same basic components, which is at first sight both curiously insistent and apparently incidental. It can be read, however, as linking these components both with the Oedipal motif (and indeed with the Oedipal theme that structures the narrative in general) and also with resonances of a (repressed) male homosexuality that pervade the film in general and the relationship between Montagu and Abrahams in particular. It can further be read in terms of the significance of patriarchal authority, not only for the position, sexuality and desire of women, but also for that of men.

This particular set of images and sequences concerns the look of the

runner at his rival during competition. The theme is first introduced when Liddell and Abrahams race one another for the first and only time. In the slow-motion replay we can see Abrahams turning to look at Liddell as Liddell overtakes him to win. After the race, Abrahams is distraught. He tells Sybil: 'I had to look at him . . . You never look.' We then cut to Abrahams and Massabini. Massabini is showing Abrahams some slides, including some of the two Americans, Paddock and Scholtz. One shows Scholtz at the tape, glancing over at the winner of the race. Massabini: 'That glance cost Scholtz the race.' Finally, there is the sequence in which Abrahams is in his dressing room, at the Olympics, being massaged by Massabini while talking to Aubrey Montagu. Abrahams tells Montagu 'You, Aubrey, are my most complete man: brave, compassionate, kind, content.' He looks out of frame. Cut to a newspaper clipping of the 200 yards. Abrahams, second in the race, is looking at his victorious rival crossing the tape.

What this recurrent element in the film seems to imply, is that winning, defined in accordance with the narrative and thematic structure of the film as achieving a stable identity within phallic authority, is dependent upon a suppression of the look at one's male sexual peers; that the achievement of an Oedipal resolution in accordance with the principles of a patriarchal society is dependent upon a repression not only of women and female desire, but also of male homosexual desire. Or rather, these developments are dependent upon a repression and simultaneous sublimation into forms of male comradeship (as instanced in the relationship between Montagu and Abrahams especially) and/or into forms of physical activity and male rivalry (as instanced in the relationship between Abrahams and Liddell and in the general theme of running – running to win).



In partial confirmation of this reading, one could point to the sequence that follows Abrahams' victory. Abrahams walks into the changing rooms, where Montagu, his constant companion throughout the film, is waiting. His mood is less one of communicative elation than of introspection. Montagu watches him go into his room. He is perplexed by his behaviour: 'But he won.' Close-up of Montagu's gaze. We cut to Sybil's dressing room back in England. A stage hand enters to announce the result of the race: 'He won, Miss.' Sybil turns to gaze into the dressing room mirror. A parallel is established between two looks which symptomatically marks Montagu's look as one of desire. However, only the female look, female desire oriented around the male, is recognised as erotic. It is to Sybil that Abrahams finally returns. Acknowledged but repressed, male desire is finally shunned.

All these aspects of *Chariots of Fire* in one sense merely elaborate its status as a fundamentally conservative film. Its interest lies in the way it symptomatically confirms, and structurally and thematically lays out, a patriarchal logic as it bears primarily not on women but, insistently, obsessively, on men.

SEFT

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Notice is given of the 31st Annual General Meeting of the Society for Education in Film and Television, to be held in London on Saturday, December 4 1982.

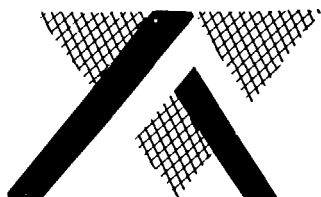
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AHAB, ISHMAEL... AND MO

JOHN CAUGHIE AND GILLIAN SKIRROW
SAMPLE CULT READINGS OF A CULT
MOVIE

¹ Introduction to Richard T. Jameson, 'Passer's Way', *Film Comment*, July/August 1981, vol 17 no 4, p 18.

² David Thomson, 'The Deaths in Santa Barbara', *Sight & Sound*, Spring 1982, vol 51 no 2, pp 114-7.

³ Richard T. Jameson, op cit, p 18.

CUTTER'S WAY HAS all the makings of a cult movie. Relatively unauthored (the director Ivan Passer and the actors John Heard and Lisa Eichhorn are signals only for the cognoscenti, and Jeff Bridges is an unstable star on which to hitch a movie), the film becomes available for the kinds of discovery and intimate possession which Big Pictures deny. Better still, it has been mauled by critics and mishandled by distributors. Under its original title, *Cutter and Bone*, it opened in New York, was panned by Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*, was withdrawn from circulation by United Artists, passed to their specialist distribution unit, United Artists Classics (specialists, precisely, in distributing difficult cult movies – what else could 'classic' now mean?), who re-advertised it and re-released it under its present title for 'selective screenings'.

Selectivity reinforces culthood, creating a prized as well as an intimate possession. ('You may or may not get to see it. Here's a report from someone who did.' – *Film Comment*.)¹ Unauthored and selectively circulated, *Cutter's Way* attracts a particular kind of critical writing: unauthored, meaning cannot easily be attributed to a source but seeks other available categories – post-Vietnam movie, contemporary *film noir* – whose privileged meanings become the meanings of the film; selectively circulated, criticism gives way to a celebratory re-telling of the film (witness David Thomson in *Sight & Sound*²) for a readership which cannot be assumed to have seen it. So be it; our writing cannot hope entirely to escape the fascinations of culthood (we did, after all, travel from Glasgow to Edinburgh to see the movie); but what we would like to avoid is some of the generality which the fascination produces. In particular, much of the sympathetic criticism which we have read identifies *Cutter's Way* as a disturbing film; but having identified disturbance, it leaves it as merely a generalised quality, a feeling ('You catch the feeling through the fine hairs on your arms.'³) to be celebrated because it guarantees the film's value as an experience. Without denying the fascination of disturbance, we want here to note it a little more precisely, tracing its causes and effects.

Cutter's Way has been picked up most consistently in reviews as a post-Vietnam movie. Clearly, in an important way, this is what it is. Cutter – a veteran, one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged – bears the scars

most visibly, but his wife, Mo, is alcoholic (whether as an escape from him or from the world is uncertain), and his friend, Bone—an Ivy-Leaguer beach-bum cum yacht salesman cum gigolo—avoided the draft, and is still distinguished by his ability to ‘walk away’. (‘There goes Richard Bone,’ says Cutter, ‘doing what he does best—walking away.’) Everything can be read as a symptom of the primal moment of Vietnam (primal, precisely: there is no sense in the film of a past for the characters before Vietnam). The excess, ambivalence and anxiety of *film noir*, backed up by visual reference, investigative structure and plot ellipsis, provides the generic correlative of an America once again post-war and uncertain.

The generality of this kind of reading of reading can be complicated, made more precise, by reference to other texts which invade the film: the pageant (surely from *Young Mr Lincoln*?) provides America with its legendary past (‘Our glorious past,’ sneers Cutter, ‘Pioneers, Indians, Mexicans...’); the white horse provides the film, and America, with fairy-tales (but never the same fairy-tale twice: it enters in a dream-like image, then Mo waits for her ‘Prince Charming on his white horse’ but refuses Bone, then it is appropriated by J. J. Cord—the Mr Big of the *film noir* investigation—as his seat of power, till finally Cutter mounts it, a knight on his white charger galloping to death and glory). Most significantly and pervasively, there is *Moby Dick*: Cutter as a crippled, obsessed Ahab; Bone as Ishmael, the one who survives to tell the tale (this is explicit: he is greeted by Cutter as his Ishmael, who carried a disease called ‘Moby Dick’). And J.J. Cord as the great white whale, the



Cutter—the crippled, obsessed Ahab—finally gets his great white... horse.

Leviathan—or not so much Cord as Cord's power: 'Thar she blows,' cries Cutter, as Cord's office towerblock, the centre of his power, hoves in sight. *Moby Dick* provides the 'elemental' impulses of the film, supplying from outside the text, motivations for the compulsive pursuit of Cord which the narrative itself wilfully obscures (justice? blackmail? revenge?), pulling the film away from the historical conflict, Vietnam, towards a more primal conflict of which Vietnam is merely a symbol. In this sense, but more deftly, *Moby Dick* functions for this film as *Heart of Darkness* functioned for *Apocalypse Now!*. For both films the significance of Vietnam is mythic rather than political.

Crucially, to hold the film in place as a post-Vietnam movie, albeit one which escapes the clichés and is *interesting*, the ending has to become some kind of Jacobean tragic redemption: Cutter gets his last wild charge, Bone finally makes his stand, and J.J. Cord's ass is finally laid on the line. But to maintain this as a redemption, a lot has to be forgotten. In particular, Mo has to be forgotten . . .

Here, we are less interested in *Cutter's Way* as a post-Vietnam movie than in the way both politics and myth are displaced disturbingly onto sexuality. At its most appropriable level, this sexuality can be read within a version of the Oedipal structure—a diadic structure rather than a triadic one, the mother absent, but the father super-powerful, in control, and held responsible for the castrating wounds on his son. (Cutter's obsessive pursuit of Cord is not because Cord is guilty, but because he is responsible. For what is not specific: simply responsible.) Cord is available for such a reading because his place in the film seems symbolic rather than simply diegetic: his relationship to the investigative narrative is uncertain, his part in the murder never proven, his appearances fleeting and enigmatic. (He speaks sparingly, and only at the very end of the film, his two key sentences signifying his control: 'I'll deal with it,' to his wife, and 'What if it was?' in response to Bone's accusation that it was he who killed the girl.) An Oedipal reading also explains the somewhat inexplicable role of George Swanson within the movie: he is the inverse of Cord, a benevolent father, tied to Cutter through his mother who was kind to George, urging Bone to take responsibility 'just one step at a time', sheltering Cutter; but ultimately weak, lacking power, selling the boys out to Cord. The adolescence of the buddy-buddy relationship between Cutter and Bone is parodic, but it specifies that sexually, socially, and as investigators they are playing boys' games. It is only when they finally confront Cord, the father within the structure, that they are able to become men (albeit, conforming to tragedy, dead men—or, at least, one dead man attended by his Ishmael/Horatio).

But this kind of Oedipal reading is ultimately unsatisfying (though temporarily good fun) and always suspicious. What it does is to reduce the Oedipal to a given structure which can be held up against the text, explicating it from a secure position but failing to account for its disturbances. For *Cutter's Way* it is as limiting as the post-Vietnam reading: it ascribes meanings, contains disturbances, fixes the sexuality which the film puts in play; and, again, it forgets Mo . . .



Branded by male aggression, the mutilated Cutter exhibits the ultimate fetish.

At a quite specific level, Mo institutes a play of looks which upsets the sexual control within the film. It is through her look that we come to recognise the adolescence of the male protagonists. At the parade, we look at Mo looking at Cutter looking at girls; in the café afterwards, Mo says nothing while Cutter plans his revenge/investigation with the reluctant Bone, but it is her look which is in control. Her knowledge seems different from that 'essentially feminine' knowledge which the cinema grants so easily to women. It is not essential to her femininity, simply given, but is constructed in a play of looks of which she is the subject. Within the narrative her look operates a distancing, distancing us from the boys' games, subverting their centrality, undermining the Oedipal. Mo looks, as much as being looked at. The body of the woman is displaced as object of the look by the deformed body of the man.

This is it: the disturbing sexuality of the film finally comes to the body. The deformed male body upsets the balance of proper relationships, and becomes the object of fascination. In the bedroom, with Mo on the bed, it is Cutter who is stripped, aided by Bone, and it is his stump that becomes the ultimate fetish, standing in for castration, provoking the voyeuristic desire to see more and the desire to look away at the same time.

Cutter's wound, his castration, gives him standing. It is here that he comes closest to Ahab.

*Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish.*⁴

⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, New York, New American Library, 1962, p 129.

Like Cutter's, Ahab's wound draws the eye in fascination (it is only after registering the scar that Ishmael notices that Ahab has an ivory leg). Like Ahab's, Cutter's wound (which, like Ahab's runs 'from crown to sole') takes on an uncertain provenance: Ahab's is rumoured to have 'come upon him' 'not in the fury of any mortal fray, but in an elemental strife at sea'; Cutter's is assumed to have come upon him in Vietnam, but it is never discussed, and Cutter, at one point, denies blithely (and unreliably) that he ever was in any war. In both cases, the force of the wound seems 'elemental' rather than historic. It functions as a brand (Ahab is compared to one branded by lightening) designating its bearer as someone who has been marked out. For Cutter, perhaps, it is the mark, not so much of Vietnam, but of a monstrous and ludicrous male aggression (his smashing of his neighbour's car, his shooting up of the teddy bear) faced with a crippling impotence. The paradox of the castrating wound is that it marks out power *and* impotence, setting him apart.

Against the standing of Cutter's castration, Bone is little more than a foil, his body visually emphasised in its wholeness, but a fantasy body which takes its meaning only from the nightmare of Cutter's. (The fantasy of the perfect body is brought almost to the point of parody by constant reference to 'clean sport': tennis, polo, sailing.) It is to the misshapen Cutter that Mo is married, upsetting the dream of perfect sexuality. Mo and Bone are the fantasy couple of the film, healthy lovers, but Cutter stands behind their coupling, urging it on but infecting it, making it impossible, and the relationship ends with Mo's incineration.

But Mo is also, in a sense, a cripple, her impairment represented by alcoholism. It presents an interesting problem for cinema: how to represent a female cripple without deforming the woman's body. The answer is easy: you internalise the deformity, preserving the female body intact. But this isn't quite true. The fascination of Cutter's visible deformity encourages us to forget that twice in the narrative the female body is deformed in ways much more monstrous than Cutter's: the murder victim, a high school majorette, is sodomised, her trachea crushed, semen in her throat; Mo is burned to death. But what we see of the one is a foot sticking out of a dust-bin, a garbage-man vomiting at the sight which we do not see; and of the other, a body-bag in the mortuary, opened and looked at (affectionately, for the first time) by Cutter but not by us. The deformity of the female body is in the narrative, abstract and unseen, the ultimate victims; the deformity of the male body is played out visually, the mark of power.

Finally, why does Mo die? (More than that, why does her death three-quarters of the way through the movie coincide with the unaccountable evacuation from the narrative of Valerie, the other woman, the sister of the murder victim who had joined Cutter and Bone in their revenge/investigation/blackmail?) Mo dies to allow the boys to be redeemed as men. Her look fixed them within their boys' games; under her look Cutter could not mount his white charger as a finally whole body, and Bone could not have made his last stand. 'Mo would have liked this,' says Cutter at one point in the final garden party where he and Bone are

passing themselves off as social sophisticates, 'She always liked dressing up.' In the confrontation with the father the boys have to be able to believe that they are no longer simply dressing up as men. It is Cord's refusal to take them seriously ('What if it was?') that makes Bone press Cutter's dead finger on the trigger. Mo disappears from the narrative (with Valerie) to clear the decks for the Oedipal confrontation. The Oedipal, or its appropriation as a given structure, arrives as the resolution rather than as the problem, offering to contain the disturbance of the film within an acceptable structure of sexuality, ordering the deformities, trying to forget the bits that don't fit. But not quite succeeding.



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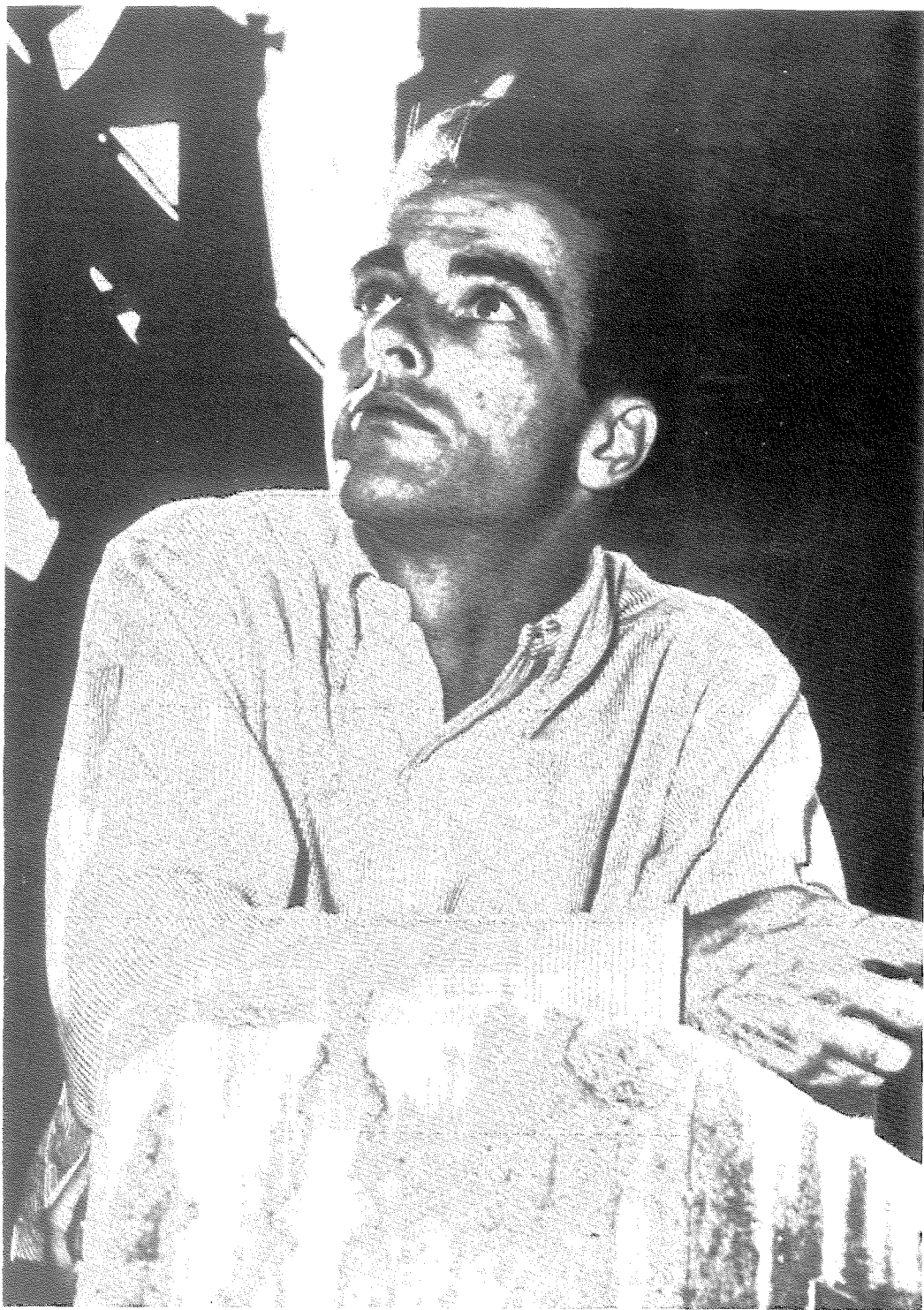
RICHARD DYER EXAMINES THE INSTABILITIES OF THE MALE PIN-UP

'ONE OF THE things I really envy about men,' a friend once said to me, 'is the right to look'. She went on to point out how in public places, on the street, at meetings, men could look freely at women, but that women could only look back surreptitiously, against the grain of their upbringing. It is a point that has been reiterated in many of the personal-political accounts that have emerged from the consciousness-raising of the Women's Movement. And it is a fact that we see endlessly reworked in movies and on television. We have all seen, countless times, that scene of Young Love, where, in the canteen, at school, in church, the Boy and the Girl first see each other. The precise way it is done is very revealing. We have a close-up of him looking off camera, followed by one of her looking downwards (in a pose that has, from time immemorial, suggested maidenliness). Quite often, we move back and forth between these two close-ups, so that it is very definitely established that he looks at her and she is looked at. Then, she may look up and off camera, and we may go back briefly to the boy still looking – but it is only briefly, for no sooner is it established that she sees him than we must be assured that she at once averts her eyes. She has seen him, but she doesn't look at him as he looks at her – having seen him, she quickly resumes being the one who is looked at.

So utterly routine is this kind of scene that we probably don't remark on it, yet it encapsulates, and effectively reinforces, one of the fundamental ways by which power relations between the sexes are maintained. In her book *Body Politics*, Nancy M Henley examines the very many different non-verbal ways that gender roles and male power are constantly being rebuilt and re-affirmed.¹ She does for gesture, body posture, facial expressions and so on what, most recently, Dale Spender's *Man Made Language*² does for verbal communication, and shows how non-verbal

¹ Nancy M Henley, *Body Politics*, Englewood Cliffs NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1977.

² Dale Spender, *Man Made Language*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.



Montgomery Clift strikes an uplifting pose for a Hollywood publicity photo.

communication is both a register of male-female relations and one of the means by which those relations are kept the way they are. Particularly relevant here is her discussion of eye contact.

Henley argues that it is not so much a question of whether women or men look at each other, but how they do. In fact, her evidence suggests that in face-to-face interactions, women look at men more than men do at women – but then this is because women listen more to men, pay more attention to them. In other words, women do not so much look at men as watch them. On the other hand, in crowd situations, men look more at women – men stare at women, whereas women avert their eyes. In both cases, this (re-)establishes male dominance. In the first case (one-to-one), ‘superior position . . . is communicated by visually ignoring the other person – *not* looking while listening, but looking into space as if the other isn’t there’; whereas in the second case (crowds), ‘staring is used to *assert* dominance – to establish, to maintain, and to regain it’.³

Images of men aimed at women – whether star portraits, pin-ups or drawings and paintings of men – are in a particularly interesting relation to these eye contact patterns. A certain instability is produced – the first of several we encounter when looking at images of men that are offered as sexual spectacle. On the one hand, this is a visual medium, these men are there to be looked at by women. On the other hand, this does violence to the codes of who looks and who is looked at (and how), and some attempt is instinctively made to counteract this violation. Much of this centres on the model or star’s own ‘look’ – where and how he is looking in relation to the woman looking at him, in the audience or as she leafs through the fan or women’s magazine (not only *Playgirl*, which has male nudes as *Playboy* has female ones, but also the new teenage magazines like *Oh Boy!* and *My Guy*, with their half-dressed pin-ups, and such features as ‘Your Daily Male’ in the *Sun* and ‘She-Male’ in *She*).

To repeat, it is not a question of whether or not the model looks at his spectator(s), but how he does or does not. In the case of not looking, where the female model typically averts her eyes, expressing modesty, patience and a lack of interest in anything else, the male model looks either off or up. In the case of the former, his look suggests an interest in something else that the viewer cannot see – it certainly doesn’t suggest any interest in the viewer. Indeed, it barely acknowledges the viewer, whereas the woman’s averted eyes do just that – they are averted from the viewer. In the cases where the model is looking up, this always suggests a spirituality: he might be there for his face and body to be gazed at, but his mind is on higher things, and it is this upward striving that is most supposed to please. This pose encapsulates the kind of dualism that Paul Hoch analyses in his study of masculinity, *White Hero Black Beast* – higher is better than lower, the head above is better than the genitals below.⁴ At the same time, the sense of straining and striving upwards does also suggest analogies with the definition of the very sexuality supposedly relegated to an inferior place – straining and striving are the terms most often used to describe male sexuality in this society.

³ Henley, *op cit*, p 166.

⁴ Paul Hoch, *White Hero Black Beast*, London, Pluto Press, 1979.

Arnold Schwarzenegger demonstrates the merits of the master race, while (opposite) Michelangelo's Moses castrates with a glance.



It may be, as is often said, that male pin-ups more often than not do not look at the viewer, but it is by no means the case that they never do. When they do, what is crucial is the kind of look it is, something very



often determined by the set of the mouth that accompanies it. When the female pin-up returns the viewer's gaze, it is usually some kind of smile, inviting. The male pin-up, even at his most benign, still stares at the viewer. Even Paul Newman's frank face-on to the camera or the *Oh Boy!* coverboy's yearning gaze at us still seems to reach beyond the boundary marked, when the photo was taken, by the camera, as if he wants to reach beyond and through and establish himself. The female model's gaze stops at that boundary, the male's looks right through it.

Freud noticed a similar sort of look on Michelangelo's statue of Moses – though Moses is not looking at us but at the Jews' worship of the Golden Calf. Since Freud, it is common to describe such a look as 'castrating' or 'penetrating' – yet to use such words to describe the look of a man at a woman is revealing in ways that Freudians do not always intend. What, after all, have women to fear from the threat of castration? And why, come to that, should the possibility of penetration be *necessarily* fearful to women? It is clear that castration can only be a threat to men, and more probable that it is the taboo of male anal eroticism that causes masculine-defined men to construct penetration as frightening and the concept of male (hetero)sexuality as 'taking' a woman that constructs penetration as an act of violence. In looking at and dealing with these castrating/penetrating looks, women are caught up in a system that does not so much address them as work out aspects of the construction of male sexuality in men's heads.

If the first instability of the male pin-up is the contradiction between the fact of being looked at and the attempt of the model's look to deny it, the second is the apparent address to women's sexuality and the actual working out of male sexuality (and this may be one of the reasons why male pin-ups notoriously don't 'work' for women). What is at stake is not just male and female sexuality, but male and female power. The maintenance of power underpins further instabilities in the image of men as sexual spectacle, in terms of the active/passive nexus of looking, the emphasis on muscularity and the symbolic association of male power and the phallus.

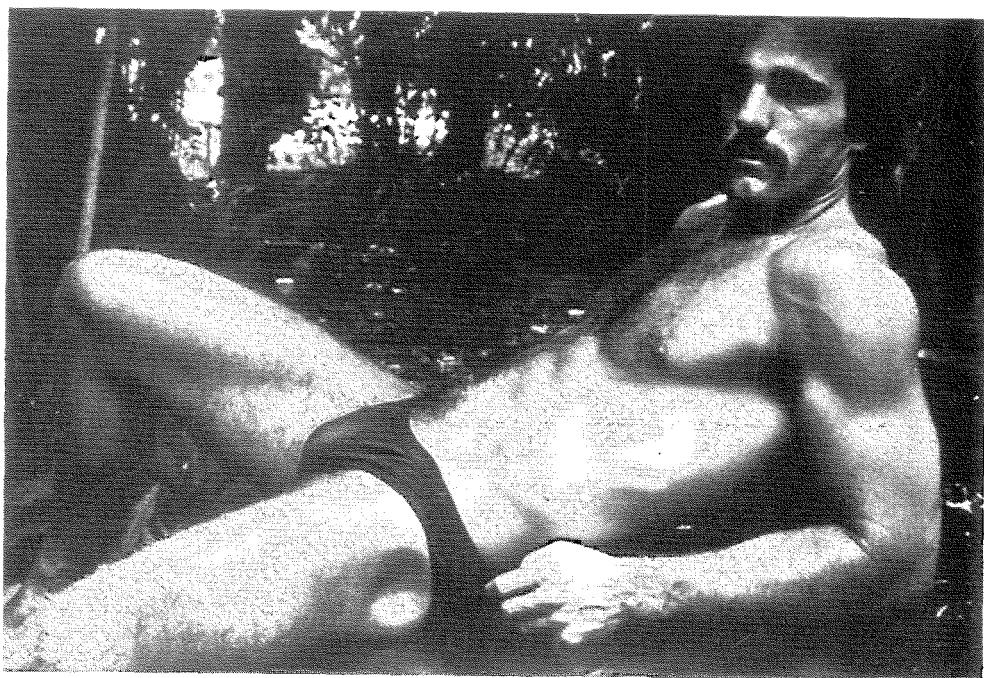
The idea of looking (staring) as power and being looked at as powerlessness overlaps with ideas of activity/passivity. Thus to look is thought of as active; whereas to be looked at is passive. In reality, this is not true. The model prepares her- or himself to be looked at, the artist or photographer constructs the image to be looked at; and, on the other hand, the image that the viewer looks at is not summoned up by his or her act of looking but in collaboration with those who have put the image there. Most of us probably experience looking and being looked at, in life as in art, somewhere among these shifting relations of activity and passivity. Yet it remains the case that images of men must disavow this element of passivity if they are to be kept in line with dominant ideas of masculinity-as-activity.

For this reason images of men are often images of men doing something. When, before the full invention of cinematography, Eadweard Muybridge took an enormous series of photographic sequences, each

one in the sequence taken a few seconds after the other, one of his intentions was to study the nature of movement. Muybridge photographed sequences of naked male and female figures. In a study of these sequences, Linda Williams shows how, even in so 'scientific' an undertaking and at such a comparatively 'primitive' stage in the development of photography, Muybridge established a difference between the female subjects, who are just there to be looked at, and the male subjects, who are doing something (carrying a boulder, sawing wood, playing baseball) which we can look in on.⁵ This distinction is maintained in the history of the pin-up, where time and again the image of the man is one caught in the middle of an action, or associated, through images in the pictures, with activity.

Even when not actually caught in an act, the male image still promises activity by the way the body is posed. Even in an apparently relaxed, supine pose, the model tightens and tautens his body so that the muscles are emphasised, hence drawing attention to the body's potential for action. More often, the male pin-up is not supine anyhow, but standing taut ready for action.

⁵ Linda Williams, 'Film Body, an Implantation of Perversions', *Cinétracts*, Winter 1981, vol 3 no 4, pp 19-35.



Ready for action: a supine model tautens his muscles for *Playgirl*.

There is an interesting divergence here in ethnic and class terms, a good example of the way that images of male power are always and necessarily inflected with other aspects of power in society. In relation to ethnicity, it is generally the case that the activity shown or implied in

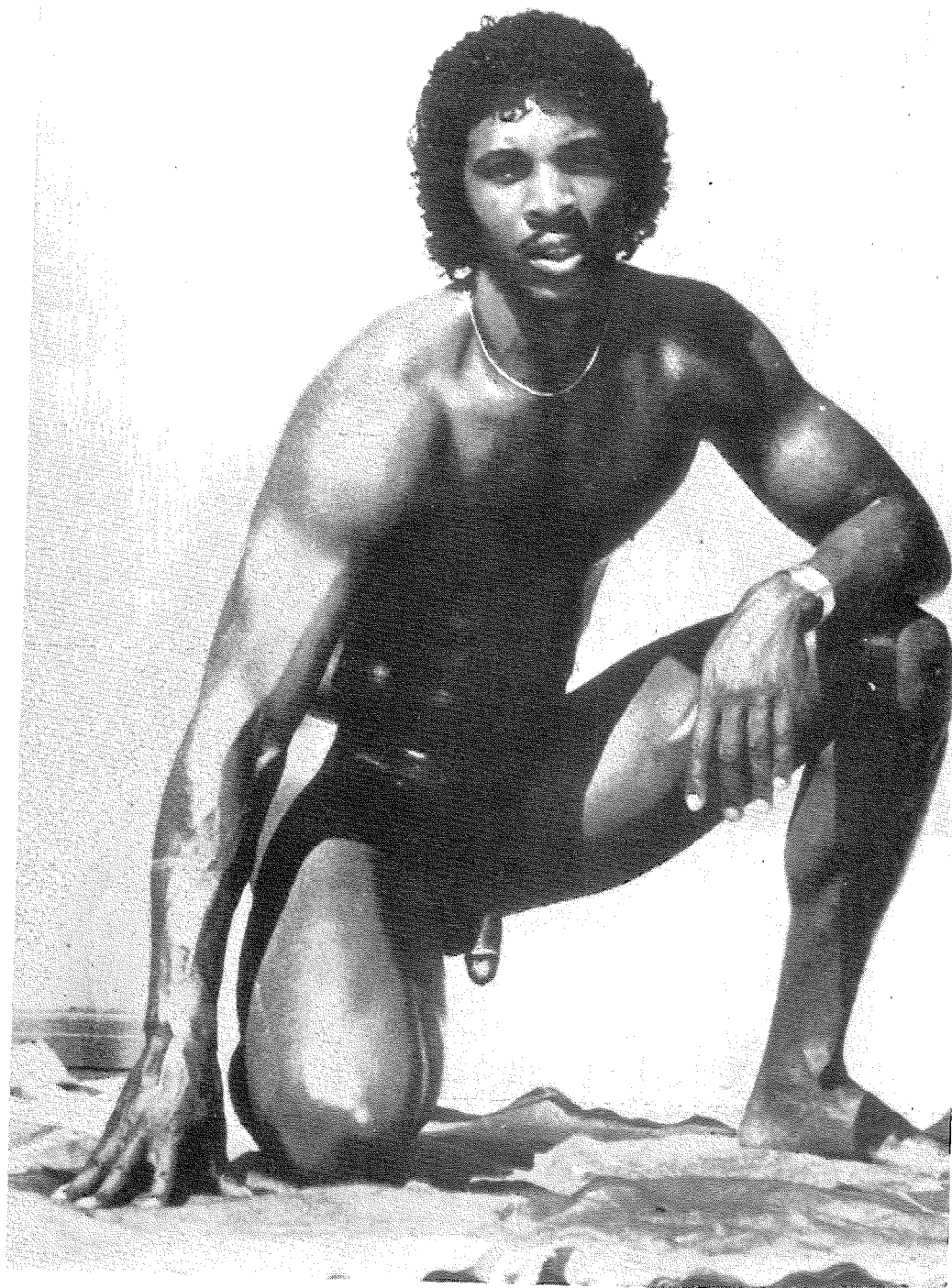
⁶ Eric Hobsbawm: 'Man and Woman in Socialist Iconography', *History Workshop Journal*, no 6, pp 121-138.

images of white men is clearly related to the split in Western society between leisure and work activity, whereas black men, even though they are in fact American or European, are given a physicality that is inextricably linked to notions of 'the jungle', and hence 'savagery'. This is done either by a natural setting, in which a generalised physical exertion is conflated with the energies of nature (and, doubtless, the beat of drums), or else, more recently, in the striking use of 'black power' symbolism. This might seem like an acknowledgement of ethnic politics, and perhaps for some viewers it is, but the way the media constructed black power in fact tended to reproduce the idea of a savage energy rather than a political movement – hence the stress on back-to-Africa (in the white Western imagination still an amorphous jungle), or the 'senseless' violence erupting from the jungle of the ghetto.

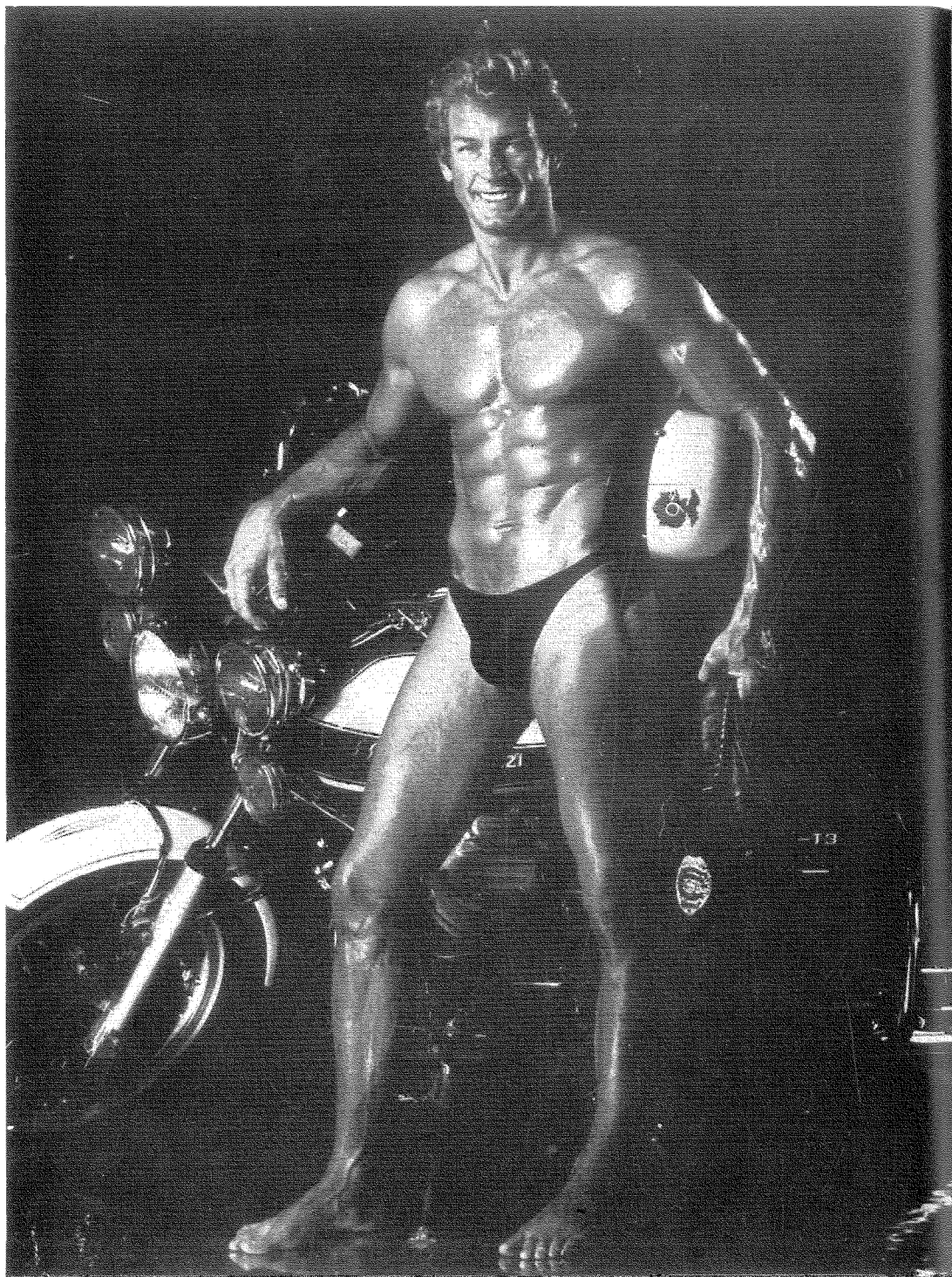
Such images also put black men 'outside of' class (though there has been the promotion of specifically middle-class black images, as with, especially, Sidney Poitier). White men are more likely to be class differentiated, but this does overlap with the work/leisure distinction. Work is in fact almost suppressed from dominant imagery in this society – it is mainly in socialist imagery that its images occur. In nineteenth century socialist and trade union art and in Soviet socialist realism the notions of the dignity and heroism of labour are expressed through dynamically muscular male bodies. As Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, what this tradition has done, in effect, is to secure for masculinity the definition of what is finest in the proletarian and socialist traditions – women have been marginalised to the ethereal role of 'inspiration'.⁶ Moreover, it is certainly no *conscious* part of this tradition that these male bodies should be a source of erotic visual pleasure, for men and women.

Sport is the area of life that is the most common contemporary source of male imagery – not only in pin-ups of sportsmen, but in the sports activities of film stars, pop stars and so on. (*She* magazine recently ran a series of pin-ups of wrestlers.) Although certain sports have very clear class associations (the Prince of Wales plays polo, not football), there is a sense in which sport is a 'leveller'. Running, swimming, ball games are pretty well open to anyone in any class, and so imagery derived from these activities does not have immediate class associations. What all imply, however, is leisure, and the strength and vitality to use it. The celebration of the body in sport is also a celebration of the relative affluence of Western society, where people have time to dedicate themselves to the development of the body for its own sake.

Whether the emphasis is on work or sport or any other activity, the body quality that is promoted is muscularity. In the copy accompanying the pin-ups in *Oh Boy!*, for instance, the female readers are called on to 'getta load of his muscles' and other such invitations. Although the hyper-developed muscularity of an Arnold Schwarzenegger is regarded by most people as excessive, and perhaps bordering on the fascist, it is still the case that muscularity is a key term in appraising men's bodies. This again probably comes from men themselves. Muscularity is the *sign* of power – natural, achieved, phallic.



From savagery to the black bourgeoisie: a short Afro and modern jewellery.



The naked civil servant: a muscular motorcycle cop naturalises sexual and state power.

At a minimum, developed muscles indicate a physical strength that women do not generally match (although recent developments in women's sport and physical conditioning suggest that differences between the sexes here may not be so fixed). The potential for muscularity in men is seen as a biological given, and is also the means of dominating both women and other men who are in the competition for the spoils of the earth – and women. The point is that muscles are biological, hence 'natural', and we persist in habits of thought, especially in the area of sexuality and gender, whereby what can be shown to be natural must be accepted as given and inevitable. The 'naturalness' of muscles legitimises male power and domination.

However, developed muscularity – muscles that *show* – is not in truth natural at all, but is rather achieved. The muscle man is the end product of his own activity of muscle-building. As always, the comparison with the female body beautiful is revealing. Rationally, we know that the beauty queen has dieted, exercised, used cleansing creams, solariums and cosmetics – but none of this really shows in her appearance, and is anyway generally construed as something that has been *done to* the woman. Conversely, a man's muscles constantly bespeak this achievement of his beauty/power.

Muscles, as well as being a sign of activity and achievement, are hard. We've already seen how even not overly developed male pin-ups harden their bodies to be looked at. This hardness may then be reinforced by aspects of setting or symbolic references, or by poses that emphasise hard lines and angular shapes (not the soft roundness of the feminine aesthetic). In her book *The Nude Male*, Margaret Walters suggests this hardness is phallic, not in the direct sense of being like an erect penis but rather in being symbolic of all that the phallus represents of 'abstract paternal power'.⁷ There is no doubt that the image of the phallus as power is widespread to the point of near-universality, all the way from tribal and early Greek fertility symbols to the language of pornography, where the penis is endlessly described as a weapon, a tool, a source of terrifying power.

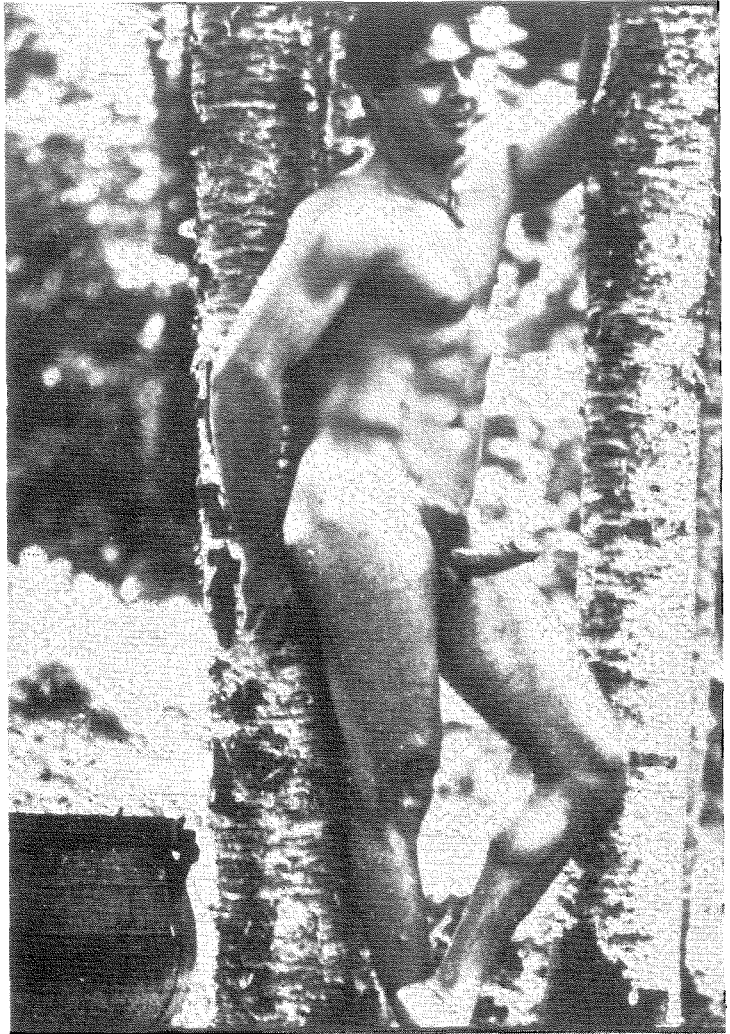
There is a danger of casual thought here. The phallus is not just an arbitrarily chosen symbol of male power; it is crucial that the penis has provided the model for this symbol. Because only men have penises, phallic symbols, even if in some sense possessed by a woman (as may be the case with female rulers, for instance), are always symbols of ultimately male power. The woman who wields 'phallic' power does so in the interests of men.⁸

This leads to the greatest instability of all for the male image. For the fact is that the penis isn't a patch on the phallus. The penis can never live up to the mystique implied by the phallus. Hence the excessive, even hysterical quality of so much male imagery. The clenched fists, the bulging muscles, the hardened jaws, the proliferation of phallic symbols – they are all straining after what can hardly ever be achieved, the embodiment of the phallic mystique. This is even more the case with the male nude. The limp penis can never match up to the mystique that has kept

⁷ Margaret Walters, *The Nude Male*, London, Paddington Press, 1978.

⁸ See, for example, Alison Heisch, 'Queen Elizabeth I and the Persistence of Patriarchy', *Feminist Review*, no 4, pp 45-56.

The masculine mystique: an erection in the US gay magazine *Blueboy* and (opposite) Warner's hysterically phallic portrait of the young Bogie.



it hidden from view for the last couple of centuries, and even the erect penis often looks awkward, stuck on to the man's body as if it is not a part of him.

Like so much else about masculinity, images of men, founded on such multiple instabilities, are such a strain. Looked at but pretending not to be, still yet asserting movement, phallic but weedy – there is seldom anything easy about such imagery. And the real trap at the heart of these instabilities is that it is precisely *straining* that is held to be the great good, what makes a man a man. Whether head held high reaching up for an impossible transcendence or penjs jerking up in a hopeless assertion of phallic mastery, men and women alike are asked to value the very things that make masculinity such an unsatisfactory definition of being human.



FILM AND THE MASQUERADE: THEORISING THE FEMALE SPECTATOR

MARY ANN DOANE ON THE
WOMAN'S GAZE

I. Heads in Hieroglyphic Bonnets

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed James Strachey, London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1964, p 113.

IN HIS LECTURE on 'Femininity', Freud forcefully inscribes the absence of the female spectator of theory in his notorious statement, '... to those of you who are women this will not apply – you are yourselves the problem...'.¹ Simultaneous with this exclusion operated upon the female members of his audience, he invokes, as a rather strange prop, a poem by Heine. Introduced by Freud's claim concerning the importance and elusiveness of his topic – 'Throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity...' – are four lines of Heine's poem:

² This is the translation given in a footnote in *The Standard Edition*, p 113.

*Heads in hieroglyphic bonnets,
Heads in turbans and black birettas,
Heads in wigs and thousand other
Wretched, sweating heads of humans...*²

The effects of the appeal to this poem are subject to the work of over-determination Freud isolated in the text of the dream. The sheer proliferation of heads and hats (and hence, through a metonymic slippage, minds), which are presumed to have confronted this intimidating riddle before Freud, confers on his discourse the weight of an intellectual history, of a tradition of interrogation. Furthermore, the image of hieroglyphics strengthens the association made between femininity and the enigmatic, the undecipherable, that which is 'other'. And yet Freud practices a slight deception here, concealing what is elided by removing the lines from their context, castrating, as it were, the stanza. For the question over which Heine's heads brood is not the same as Freud's – it is not 'What is Woman?', but instead, '... what signifies Man?' The

quote is taken from the seventh section (entitled 'Questions') of the second cycle of *The North Sea*. The full stanza, presented as the words of 'a young man,/ His breast full of sorrow, his head full of doubt', reads as follows:

*O solve me the riddle of life,
The teasingly time-old riddle,
Over which many heads already have brooded,
Heads in hats of hieroglyphics,
Turbaned heads and heads in black skull-caps,
Heads in perrukes and a thousand other
Poor, perspiring human heads –
Tell me, what signifies Man?
Whence does he come? Whither does he go?
Who lives up there upon golden stars?*³

³ Heinrich Heine,
The North Sea,
trans Vernon
Watkins, New
York, New
Direction Books,
1951, p 77.

The question in Freud's text is thus a disguise and a displacement of that other question, which in the pre-text is both humanistic and theological. The claim to investigate an otherness is a pretense, haunted by the mirror-effect by means of which the question of the woman reflects only the man's own ontological doubts. Yet what interests me most in this intertextual mis-representation is that the riddle of femininity is initiated from the beginning in Freud's text as a question in masquerade. But I will return to the issue of masquerade later.

More pertinently, as far as the cinema is concerned, it is not accidental that Freud's eviction of the female spectator/auditor is co-present with the invocation of a hieroglyphic language. The woman, the enigma, the hieroglyphic, the picture, the image – the metonymic chain connects with another: the cinema, the theatre of pictures, a writing in images of the woman but not *for* her. For she *is* the problem. The semantic valence attributed to a hieroglyphic language is two-edged. In fact, there is a sense in which the term is inhabited by a contradiction. On the one hand, the hieroglyphic is summoned, particularly when it merges with a discourse on the woman, to connote an indecipherable language, a signifying system which denies its own function by failing to signify anything to the uninitiated, to those who do not hold the key. In this sense, the hieroglyphic, like the woman, harbours a mystery, an inaccessible though desirable otherness. On the other hand, the hieroglyphic is the most readable of languages. Its immediacy, its accessibility are functions of its status as a *pictorial* language, a writing in images. For the image is theorised in terms of a certain *closeness*, the lack of a distance or gap between sign and referent. Given its iconic characteristics, the relationship between signifier and signified is understood as less arbitrary in imagistic systems of representation than in language 'proper'. The intimacy of signifier and signified in the iconic sign negates the distance which defines phonetic language. And it is the absence of this crucial distance or gap which also, simultaneously, specifies both the hieroglyphic and the female. This is precisely why Freud evicted the woman from his lecture on femininity. Too close to herself, entangled in her

⁴ In other words, the woman can never ask her own ontological question. The absurdity of such a situation within traditional discursive conventions can be demonstrated by substituting a 'young woman' for the 'young man' of Heine's poem.

⁵ As Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov point out in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, trans. Catherine Porter, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, p. 195, the potentially universal understandability of the hieroglyphic is highly theoretical and can only be thought as the unattainable ideal of an imagistic system: 'It is important of course not to exaggerate either the resemblance of the image with the object – the design is stylized very rapidly – or the "natural" and "universal" character of the signs: Sumerian, Chinese, Egyptian and Hittite hieroglyphics for the same object have nothing in common.'

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 194. Emphasis mine.

own enigma, she could not step back, could not achieve the necessary distance of a second look.⁴

Thus, while the hieroglyphic is an indecipherable or at least enigmatic language, it is also and at the same time potentially the most universally understandable, comprehensible, appropriable of signs.⁵ And the woman shares this contradictory status. But it is here that the analogy slips. For hieroglyphic languages are *not* perfectly iconic. They would not achieve the status of languages if they were – due to what Todorov and Ducrot refer to as a certain non-generalisability of the iconic sign:

*Now it is the impossibility of generalizing this principle of representation that has introduced even into fundamentally morphemographic writing systems such as Chinese, Egyptian, and Sumerian, the phonographic principle. We might almost conclude that every logography [the graphic system of language notation] grows out of the impossibility of a generalized iconic representation; proper nouns and abstract notions (including inflections) are then the ones that will be noted phonetically.*⁶

The iconic system of representation is inherently deficient – it cannot disengage itself from the 'real', from the concrete; it lacks the gap necessary for generalisability (for Saussure, this is the idea that, 'Signs which are arbitrary realise better than others the ideal of the semiotic process.'). The woman, too, is defined by such an insufficiency. My insistence upon the congruence between certain theories of the image and theories of femininity is an attempt to dissect the *episteme* which assigns to the woman a special place in cinematic representation while denying her access to that system.

The cinematic apparatus inherits a theory of the image which is not conceived outside of sexual specifications. And historically, there has always been a certain imbrication of the cinematic image and the representation of the woman. The woman's relation to the camera and the scopic regime is quite different from that of the male. As Noël Burch points out, the early silent cinema, through its insistent inscription of scenarios of voyeurism, conceives of its spectator's viewing pleasure in terms of that of the Peeping Tom, behind the screen, reduplicating the spectator's position in relation to the woman as screen.⁷ Spectatorial desire, in contemporary film theory, is generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. The image orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression. The woman's beauty, her very desirability, becomes a function of certain practices of imaging – framing, lighting, camera movement, angle. She is thus, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out, more closely associated with the surface of the image than its illusory depths, its constructed 3-dimensional space which the man is destined to inhabit and hence control.⁸ In *Now Voyager*, for instance, a single image signals the momentous transformation of the Bette Davis character from ugly spinster aunt to glamorous single woman. Charles

Affron describes the specifically cinematic aspect of this operation as a 'stroke of genius':

*The radical shadow bisecting the face in white/dark/white strata creates a visual phenomenon quite distinct from the makeup transformation of lipstick and plucked eyebrows. . . . This shot does not reveal what we commonly call acting, especially after the most recent exhibition of that activity, but the sense of face belongs to a plastique pertinent to the camera. The viewer is allowed a different perceptual referent, a chance to come down from the nerve-jarring, first sequence and to use his eyes anew.*⁹

A 'plastique pertinent to the camera' constitutes the woman not only as the image of desire but as the desirous image – one which the devoted cinéophile can cherish and embrace. To 'have' the cinema is, in some sense, to 'have' the woman. But *Now Voyager* is, in Affron's terms, a 'tear-jerker', in others, a 'woman's picture', i.e. a film purportedly produced for a female audience. What, then, of the female spectator? What can one say about her desire in relation to this process of imaging? It would seem that what the cinematic institution has in common with Freud's gesture is the eviction of the female spectator from a discourse purportedly about her (the cinema, psychoanalysis) – one which, in fact, narrativises her again and again.

II. A Lass But Not a Lack

Theories of female spectatorship are thus rare, and when they are produced, seem inevitably to confront certain blockages in conceptualisation. The difficulties in thinking female spectatorship demand consideration. After all, even if it is admitted that the woman is frequently the object of the voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze in the cinema, what is there to prevent her from reversing the relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure? Precisely the fact that the reversal itself remains locked within the same logic. The male striptease, the gigolo – both inevitably signify the mechanism of reversal itself, constituting themselves as aberrations whose acknowledgment simply reinforces the dominant system of aligning sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy. And an essential attribute of that dominant system is the matching of male subjectivity with the agency of the look.

The supportive binary opposition at work here is not only that utilised by Laura Mulvey – an opposition between passivity and activity, but perhaps more importantly, an opposition between proximity and distance in relation to the image.¹⁰ It is in this sense that the very logic behind the structure of the gaze demands a sexual division. While the distance between image and signified (or even referent) is theorised as minimal, if not non-existent, that between the film and the spectator must be maintained, even measured. One need only think of Noël Burch's mapping of spectatorship as a perfect distance from the screen

⁷ See Noël Burch's film, *Correction Please, or How We Got Into Pictures*.

⁸ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 12-13.

⁹ Charles Affron, *Star Acting: Gish, Garbo, Davis*, New York, E P Dutton, 1977, pp 281-282.

¹⁰ This argument focuses on the image to the exclusion of any consideration of the soundtrack primarily because it is the process of imaging which seems to constitute the major difficulty in theorising female spectatorship. The image is also popularly understood as metonymic signifier for the cinema as a whole and for good reason: historically, sound has been subordinate to the image within the dominant classical system. For more on the image/sound distinction in relation to sexual difference see my article, 'The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space', *Yale French Studies*, no 60, pp 33-50.

¹¹ Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans Helen R Lane, New York and Washington, Praeger Publishers, 1973, p 35.

¹² Christian Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier', *Screen*, Summer 1975, vol 16 no 2, p 60.

¹³ *ibid*, p 61.

(two times the width of the image)—a point in space from which the filmic discourse is most accessible.¹¹

But the most explicit representation of this opposition between proximity and distance is contained in Christian Metz's analysis of voyeuristic desire in terms of a kind of social hierarchy of the senses: 'It is no accident that the main socially acceptable arts are based on the senses at a distance, and that those which depend on the senses of contact are often regarded as "minor" arts (=culinary arts, art of perfumes, etc.).'¹² The voyeur, according to Metz, must maintain a distance between himself and the image—the cinéophile *needs* the gap which represents for him the very distance between desire and its object. In this sense, voyeurism is theorised as a type of meta-desire:

*If it is true of all desire that it depends on the infinite pursuit of its absent object, voyeuristic desire, along with certain forms of sadism, is the only desire whose principle of distance symbolically and spatially evokes this fundamental rent.*¹³

Yet even this status as meta-desire does not fully characterise the cinema for it is a feature shared by other arts as well (painting, theatre, opera, etc.). Metz thus adds another reinscription of this necessary distance. What specifies the cinema is a further re-duplication of the lack which prompts desire. The cinema is characterised by an illusory sensory plenitude (there is 'so much to see') and yet haunted by the absence of those very objects which are there to be seen. Absence is an absolute and irrecoverable distance. In other words, Noël Burch is quite right in aligning spectatorial desire with a certain spatial configuration. The viewer must not sit either too close or too far from the screen. The result of both would be the same—he would lose the image of his desire.

It is precisely this opposition between proximity and distance, control of the image and its loss, which locates the possibilities of spectatorship within the problematic of sexual difference. For the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image—she *is* the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism—the female look demands a becoming. It thus appears to negate the very distance or gap specified by Metz and Burch as the essential precondition for voyeurism. From this perspective, it is important to note the constant recurrence of the motif of proximity in feminist theories (especially those labelled 'new French feminisms') which purport to describe a feminine specificity. For Luce Irigaray, female anatomy is readable as a constant relation of the self to itself, as an autoeroticism based on the embrace of the two lips which allow the woman to touch herself without mediation. Furthermore, the very notion of property, and hence possession of something which can be constituted as other, is antithetical to the woman: 'Nearness however, is not foreign to woman, a nearness so close that any identification of one or the other, and therefore any form of property, is impossible. Woman enjoys a closeness with the other that is *so near she cannot*

possess it any more than she can possess herself.' ¹⁴ Or, in the case of female madness or delirium, '... women do not manage to articulate their madness: they suffer it directly in their body ...'. ¹⁵ The distance necessary to detach the signifiers of madness from the body in the construction of even a discourse which exceeds the boundaries of sense is lacking. In the words of Hélène Cixous, 'More so than men who are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body.' ¹⁶

This theme of the overwhelming presence-to-itself of the female body is elaborated by Sarah Kofman and Michèle Montrelay as well. Kofman describes how Freudian psychoanalysis outlines a scenario whereby the subject's passage from the mother to the father is simultaneous with a passage from the senses to reason, nostalgia for the mother henceforth signifying a longing for a different positioning in relation to the sensory or the somatic, and the degree of civilization measured by the very distance from the body. ¹⁷ Similarly, Montrelay argues that while the male has the possibility of displacing the first object of desire (the mother), the female must become that object of desire:

Recovering herself as maternal body (and also as phallus), the woman can no longer repress, 'lose,' the first stake of representation. ... From now on, anxiety, tied to the presence of this body, can only be insistent, continuous. This body, so close, which she has to occupy, is an object in excess which must be 'lost,' that is to say, repressed, in order to be symbolised. ¹⁸

This body so close, so excessive, prevents the woman from assuming a position similar to the man's in relation to signifying systems. For she is haunted by the loss of a loss, the lack of that lack so essential for the realisation of the ideals of semiotic systems.

Female specificity is thus theorised in terms of spatial proximity. In opposition to this 'closeness' to the body, a spatial distance in the male's relation to his body rapidly becomes a temporal distance in the service of knowledge. This is presented quite explicitly in Freud's analysis of the construction of the 'subject supposed to know'. The knowledge involved here is a knowledge of sexual difference as it is organised in relation to the structure of the look, turning on the visibility of the penis. For the little girl in Freud's description seeing and knowing are simultaneous – there is no temporal gap between them. In 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes', Freud claims that the girl, upon seeing the penis for the first time, 'makes her judgement and her decision in a flash. She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it.' ¹⁹ In the lecture on 'Femininity' Freud repeats this gesture, merging perception and intellection: 'They [girls] at once notice the difference and, it must be admitted, its significance too.' ²⁰

The little boy, on the other hand, does not share this immediacy of understanding. When he first sees the woman's genitals he 'begins by showing irresolution and lack of interest; he sees nothing or disowns what he has seen, he softens it down or looks about for expedients for

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which Is Not One', *New French Feminisms*, ed Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, pp 104-105.

¹⁵ Irigaray, 'Women's Exile', *Ideology and Consciousness*, no 1 (May 1977), p 74.

¹⁶ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *New French Feminisms*, p 257.

¹⁷ Sarah Kofman, 'Ex: The Woman's Enigma', *Enclitic*, vol IV no 2 (Fall 1980), p 20.

¹⁸ Michèle Montrelay, 'Inquiry into Femininity', *m/f*, no 1 (1978), pp 91-92.

¹⁹ Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes', *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed Philip Rieff, New York, Collier Books, 1963, pp 187-188.

²⁰ Freud, 'Femininity', *op cit*, p 125.

²¹ Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences...', op cit, p 187.

²² Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1974, p 154.

²³ Irigaray, 'Women's Exile', op cit, p 65.

²⁴ Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts... inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', *Framework*, (Summer 1981), p 13.

bringing it into line with his expectations'.²¹ A second event, the threat of castration, is necessary to prompt a rereading of the image, endowing it with a meaning in relation to the boy's own subjectivity. It is in the distance between the look and the threat that the boy's relation to knowledge of sexual difference is formulated. The boy, unlike the girl in Freud's description, is capable of a re-vision of earlier events, a retrospective understanding which invests the events with a significance which is in no way linked to an immediacy of sight. This gap between the visible and the knowable, the very possibility of disowning what is seen, prepares the ground for fetishism. In a sense, the male spectator is destined to be a fetishist, balancing knowledge and belief.

The female, on the other hand, must find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to assume the position of fetishist. That body which is so close continually reminds her of the castration which cannot be 'fetishised away'. The lack of a distance between seeing and understanding, the mode of judging 'in a flash', is conducive to what might be termed as 'over-identification' with the image. The association of tears and 'wet wasted afternoons' (in Molly Haskell's words)²² with genres specified as feminine (the soap opera, the 'woman's picture') points very precisely to this type of over-identification, this abolition of a distance, in short, this inability to fetishise. The woman is constructed differently in relation to processes of looking. For Irigaray, this dichotomy between distance and proximity is described as the fact that:

*The masculine can partly look at itself, speculate about itself, represent itself and describe itself for what it is, whilst the feminine can try to speak to itself through a new language, but cannot describe itself from outside or in formal terms, except by identifying itself with the masculine, thus by losing itself.*²³

Irigaray goes even further: the woman always has a problematic relation to the visible, to form, to structures of seeing. She is much more comfortable with, closer to, the sense of touch.

The pervasiveness, in theories of the feminine, of descriptions of such a claustrophobic closeness, a deficiency in relation to structures of seeing and the visible, must clearly have consequences for attempts to theorise female spectatorship. And, in fact, the result is a tendency to view the female spectator as the site of an oscillation between a feminine position and a masculine position, invoking the metaphor of the transvestite. Given the structures of cinematic narrative, the woman who identifies with a female character must adopt a passive or masochistic position, while identification with the active hero necessarily entails an acceptance of what Laura Mulvey refers to as a certain 'masculinisation' of spectatorship.

*... as desire is given cultural materiality in a text, for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a habit that very easily becomes second Nature. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes.*²⁴

The transvestite wears clothes which signify a different sexuality, a sexuality which, for the woman, allows a mastery over the image and the very possibility of attaching the gaze to desire. Clothes make the man, as they say. Perhaps this explains the ease with which women can slip into male clothing. As both Freud and Cixous point out, the woman seems to be *more* bisexual than the man. A scene from Cukor's *Adam's Rib* graphically demonstrates this ease of female transvestism. As Katherine Hepburn asks the jury to imagine the sex role reversal of the three major characters involved in the case, there are three dissolves linking each of the characters successively to shots in which they are dressed in the clothes of the opposite sex. What characterises the sequence is the marked facility of the transformation of the two women into men in contradistinction to a certain resistance in the case of the man. The acceptability of the female reversal is quite distinctly opposed to the male reversal which seems capable of representation only in terms of farce. Male transvestism is an occasion for laughter; female transvestism only another occasion for desire.

Thus, while the male is locked into sexual identity, the female can at least pretend that she is other – in fact, sexual mobility would seem to be a distinguishing feature of femininity in its cultural construction. Hence, transvestism would be fully recuperable. The idea seems to be this: it is understandable that women would want to be men, for everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position. What is not understandable within the given terms is why a woman might flaunt her femininity, produce herself as an excess of femininity, in other words, foreground the masquerade. Masquerade is not as recuperable as transvestism precisely because it constitutes an acknowledgement that it is femininity itself which is constructed as mask – as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity. For Joan Riviere, the first to theorise the concept, the masquerade of femininity is a kind of reaction-formation against the woman's trans-sex identification, her transvestism. After assuming the position of the subject of discourse rather than its object, the intellectual woman whom Riviere analyses felt compelled to compensate for this theft of masculinity by over-doing the gestures of feminine flirtation.

*Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it – much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the masquerade. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.*²⁵

The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely,

²⁵ Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', *Psychoanalysis and Female Sexuality*, ed Hendrik M Ruitenbeek, New Haven, College and University Press, 1966, p 213. My analysis of the concept of masquerade differs markedly from that of Luce Irigaray. See *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977), pp 131-132. It also diverges to a great extent from the very important analysis of masquerade presented by Claire Johnston in 'Femininity and the Masquerade: Anne of the Indies', *Jacques Tourneur* London, British Film Institute, 1975, pp 36-44. I am indebted to her for the reference to Riviere's article.

²⁶ Moustafa Safouan, 'Is the Oedipus Complex Universal?', *m/f*, nos 5-6 (1981), pp 84-85.

²⁷ Montrelay, *op cit*, p 93.

²⁸ Silvia Bovenschen, 'Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?', *New German Critique*, no 10 (Winter 1977), p 129.

²⁹ Montrelay, *op cit*, p 93.

imagistic. The transvestite adopts the sexuality of the other – the woman becomes a man in order to attain the necessary distance from the image. Masquerade, on the other hand, involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image. If, as Moustafa Safouan points out, '... to wish to include in oneself as an object the cause of the desire of the Other is a formula for the structure of hysteria',²⁶ then masquerade is anti-hysterical for it works to effect a separation between the cause of desire and oneself. In Montrelay's words, 'the woman uses her own body as a disguise.'²⁷

The very fact that we can speak of a woman 'using' her sex or 'using' her body for particular gains is highly significant – it is not that a man cannot use his body in this way but that he doesn't have to. The masquerade doubles representation; it is constituted by a hyperbolisation of the accoutrements of femininity. *A propos* of a recent performance by Marlene Dietrich, Sylvia Bovenschen claims, '... we are watching a woman demonstrate the representation of a woman's body.'²⁸ This type of masquerade, an excess of femininity, is aligned with the *femme fatale* and, as Montrelay explains, is necessarily regarded by men as evil incarnate: 'It is this evil which scandalises whenever woman plays out her sex in order to evade the word and the law. Each time she subverts a law or a word which relies on the predominantly masculine structure of the look.'²⁹ By destabilising the image, the masquerade confounds this masculine structure of the look. It effects a defamiliarisation of female iconography. Nevertheless, the preceding account simply specifies masquerade as a type of representation which carries a threat, disarticulating male systems of viewing. Yet, it specifies nothing with respect to female spectatorship. What might it mean to masquerade as spectator? To assume the mask in order to see in a different way?

III. 'Men Seldom Make Passes at Girls Who Wear Glasses'

The first scene in *Now Voyager* depicts the Bette Davis character as repressed, unattractive and undesirable or, in her own words, as the spinster aunt of the family. ('Every family has one.') She has heavy eyebrows, keeps her hair bound tightly in a bun, and wears glasses, a drab dress and heavy shoes. By the time of the shot discussed earlier, signalling her transformation into beauty, the glasses have disappeared, along with the other signifiers of unattractiveness. Between these two moments there is a scene in which the doctor who cures her actually confiscates her glasses (as a part of the cure). The woman who wears glasses constitutes one of the most intense visual clichés of the cinema. The image is a heavily marked condensation of motifs concerned with repressed sexuality, knowledge, visibility and vision, intellectuality, and desire. The woman with glasses signifies simultaneously intellectuality and undesirability; but the moment she removes her glasses (a moment

which, it seems, must almost always be *shown* and which is itself linked with a certain sensual quality), she is transformed into spectacle, the very picture of desire. Now, it must be remembered that the cliché is a heavily loaded moment of signification, a social knot of meaning. It is characterised by an effect of ease and naturalness. Yet, the cliché has a binding power so strong that it indicates a precise moment of ideological danger or threat – in this case, the woman's appropriation of the gaze. Glasses worn by a woman in the cinema do not generally signify a deficiency in seeing but an active looking, or even simply the fact of seeing as opposed to being seen. The intellectual woman looks and analyses, and in usurping the gaze she poses a threat to an entire system of representation. It is as if the woman had forcefully moved to the other side of the specular. The overdetermination of the image of the woman with glasses, its status as a cliché, is a crucial aspect of the cinematic alignment of structures of seeing and being seen with sexual difference. The cliché, in assuming an immediacy of understanding, acts as a mechanism for the naturalisation of sexual difference.

But the figure of the woman with glasses is only an extreme moment of a more generalised logic. There is always a certain excessiveness, a difficulty associated with women who appropriate the gaze, who insist upon looking. Linda Williams has demonstrated how, in the genre of the horror film, the woman's active looking is ultimately punished. And what she sees, the monster, is only a mirror of herself – both woman and monster are freakish in their difference – defined by either 'too much' or 'too little'.³⁰ Just as the dominant narrative cinema repetitively inscribes scenarios of voyeurism, internalising or narrativising the film-spectator relationship (in films like *Psycho*, *Rear Window*, *Peeping Tom*), taboos in seeing are insistently formulated in relation to the female spectator as well. The man with binoculars is countered by the woman with glasses. The gaze must be dissociated from mastery. In *Leave Her to Heaven* (John Stahl, 1945), the female protagonist's (Gene Tierney's) excessive desire and over-possessiveness are signalled from the very beginning of the film by her intense and sustained stare at the major male character, a stranger she first encounters on a train. The discomfort her look causes is graphically depicted. The Gene Tierney character is ultimately revealed to be the epitome of evil – killing her husband's crippled younger brother, her unborn child and ultimately herself in an attempt to brand her cousin as a murderess in order to insure her husband's future fidelity. In *Humoresque* (Jean Negulesco, 1946), Joan Crawford's problematic status is a result of her continual attempts to assume the position of spectator – fixing John Garfield with her gaze. Her transformation from spectator to spectacle is signified repetitively by the gesture of removing her glasses. Rosa, the character played by Bette Davis in *Beyond the Forest* (King Vidor, 1949) walks to the station every day simply to *watch* the train departing for Chicago. Her fascination with the train is a fascination with its phallic power to transport her to 'another place'. This character is also specified as having a 'good eye' – she can shoot, both pool and guns. In all three films the woman is constructed as the site of

³⁰ Linda Williams, 'When the Woman Looks . . .', in *Revision: Feminist Essays in Film Analysis*, ed Mary Ann Doane, Pat Mellencamp and Linda Williams, forthcoming.

³¹ Johnston, *op cit*, p 40.

an excessive and dangerous desire. This desire mobilises extreme efforts of containment and unveils the sadistic aspect of narrative. In all three films the woman dies. As Claire Johnston points out, death is the 'location of all impossible signs',³¹ and the films demonstrate that the woman as subject of the gaze is clearly an impossible sign. There is a perverse re-writing of this logic of the gaze in *Dark Victory* (Edmund Goulding, 1939), where the woman's story achieves heroic and tragic proportions not only in blindness, but in a blindness which mimes sight – when the woman pretends to be able to see.

IV. Out of the Cinema and into the Streets: The Censorship of the Female Gaze



'*Un Regard Oblique*': a dirty joke at the expense of the woman's look.

This process of narrativising the negation of the female gaze in the classical Hollywood cinema finds its perfect encapsulation in a still photograph taken in 1948 by Robert Doisneau, '*Un Regard Oblique*'. Just as the Hollywood narratives discussed above purport to centre a female protagonist, the photograph appears to give a certain prominence to a woman's look. Yet, both the title of the photograph and its organisation of space indicate that the real site of scopophilic power is on the margins of the frame. The man is not centred; in fact, he occupies a very narrow space on the extreme right of the picture. Nevertheless, it is his gaze

which defines the problematic of the photograph; it is his gaze which effectively erases that of the woman. Indeed, as subject of the gaze, the woman looks intently. But not only is the object of her look concealed from the spectator, her gaze is encased by the two poles defining the masculine axis of vision. Fascinated by nothing visible – a blankness or void for the spectator – unanchored by a ‘sight’ (there is nothing ‘proper’ to her vision – save, perhaps, the mirror), the female gaze is left free-floating, vulnerable to subjection. The faint reflection in the shop window of only the frame of the picture at which she is looking serves merely to rearticulate, *en abyme*, the emptiness of her gaze, the absence of her desire in representation.

On the other hand, the object of the male gaze is fully present, *there* for the spectator. The fetishistic representation of the nude female body, fully in view, insures a masculinisation of the spectatorial position. The woman’s look is literally outside the triangle which traces a complicity between the man, the nude, and the spectator. The feminine presence in the photograph, despite a diegetic centring of the female subject of the gaze, is taken over by the picture as object. And, as if to doubly ‘frame’ her in the act of looking, the painting situates its female figure as a spectator (although it is not clear whether she is looking at herself in a mirror or peering through a door or window). While this drama of seeing is played out at the surface of the photograph, its deep space is activated by several young boys, out-of-focus, in front of a belt shop. The opposition out-of-focus/in-focus reinforces the supposed clarity accorded to the representation of the woman’s ‘non-vision’. Furthermore, since this out-of-focus area constitutes the precise literal centre of the image, it also demonstrates how the photograph makes figurative the operation of centring – draining the actual centre point of significance in order to deposit meaning on the margins. The male gaze is centred, in control – although it is exercised from the periphery.

The spectator’s pleasure is thus produced through the framing/negation of the female gaze. The woman is there as the butt of a joke – a ‘dirty joke’ which, as Freud has demonstrated, is always constructed at the expense of a woman. In order for a dirty joke to emerge in its specificity in Freud’s description, the object of desire – the woman – must be absent and a third person (another man) must be present as witness to the joke – ‘so that gradually, in place of the woman, the onlooker, now the listener, becomes the person to whom the smut is addressed . . .’.³² The terms of the photograph’s address as joke once again insure a masculinisation of the place of the spectator. The operation of the dirty joke is also inextricably linked by Freud to scopophilia and the exposure of the female body:

*Smut is like an exposure of the sexually different person to whom it is directed. By the utterance of the obscene words it compels the person who is assailed to imagine the part of the body or the procedure in question and shows her that the assailant is himself imagining it. It cannot be doubted that the desire to see what is sexual exposed is the original motive of smut.*³³

³² Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans James Strachey, New York, W W Norton & Company, Inc, 1960, p 99.

³³ *ibid*, p 98.

³⁴ Weston J Naef, *Counterparts: Form and Emotion in Photographs*, New York, E P Dutton and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982, pp 48-49.

³⁵ *ibid.*

From this perspective, the photograph lays bare the very mechanics of the joke through its depiction of sexual exposure and a surreptitious act of seeing (and desiring). Freud's description of the joke-work appears to constitute a perfect analysis of the photograph's orchestration of the gaze. There is a 'voice-off' of the photographic discourse, however – a component of the image which is beyond the frame of this little scenario of voyeurism. On the far left-hand side of the photograph, behind the wall holding the painting of the nude, is the barely detectable painting of a woman imaged differently, in darkness – *out of sight* for the male, blocked by his fetish. Yet, to point to this almost invisible alternative in imaging is also only to reveal once again the analyst's own perpetual desire to find a not-seen that might break the hold of representation. Or to laugh last.

There is a sense in which the photograph's delineation of a sexual politics of looking is almost uncanny. But, to counteract the very possibility of such a perception, the language of the art critic effects a naturalisation of this joke on the woman. The art-critical reception of the picture emphasizes a natural but at the same time 'imaginative' relation between photography and life, ultimately subordinating any formal relations to a referential ground: 'Doisneau's lines move from right to left, directed by the man's glance; the woman's gaze creates a line of energy like a hole in space. . . . The creation of these relationships from life itself is imagination in photography.'³⁴ 'Life itself', then, presents the material for an 'artistic' organisation of vision along the lines of sexual difference. Furthermore, the critic would have us believe that chance events and arbitrary clicks of the shutter cannot be the agents of a generalised sexism because they are particular, unique – 'Keitzes and Doisneau depend entirely upon our recognition that they were present at the instant of the unique intersection of events.'³⁵ Realism seems always to reside in the streets and, indeed, the out-of-focus boy across the street, at the centre of the photograph, appears to act as a guarantee of the 'chance' nature of the event, its arbitrariness, in short – its realism. Thus, in the discourse of the art critic the photograph, in capturing a moment, does not construct it; the camera finds a naturally given series of subject and object positions. What the critic does not consider are the conditions of reception of photography as an art form, its situation within a much larger network of representation. What is it that makes the photograph not only readable but pleasurable – at the expense of the woman? The critic does not ask what makes the photograph a negotiable item in a market of signification.

V. The Missing Look

The photograph displays insistently, in microcosm, the structure of the cinematic inscription of a sexual differentiation in modes of looking. Its process of framing the female gaze repeats that of the cinematic narratives described above, from *Leave Her to Heaven* to *Dark Victory*. Films

play out scenarios of looking in order to outline the terms of their own understanding. And given the divergence between masculine and feminine scenarios, those terms would seem to be explicitly negotiated as markers of sexual difference. Both the theory of the image and its apparatus, the cinema, produce a position for the female spectator – a position which is ultimately untenable because it lacks the attribute of distance so necessary for an adequate reading of the image. The entire elaboration of femininity as a closeness, a nearness, as present-to-itself is not the definition of an essence but the delineation of a *place* culturally assigned to the woman. Above and beyond a simple adoption of the masculine position in relation to the cinematic sign, the female spectator is given two options: the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one's own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way. The effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the woman. Doisneau's photograph is not readable by the female spectator – it can give her pleasure only in masochism. In order to 'get' the joke, she must once again assume the position of transvestite.

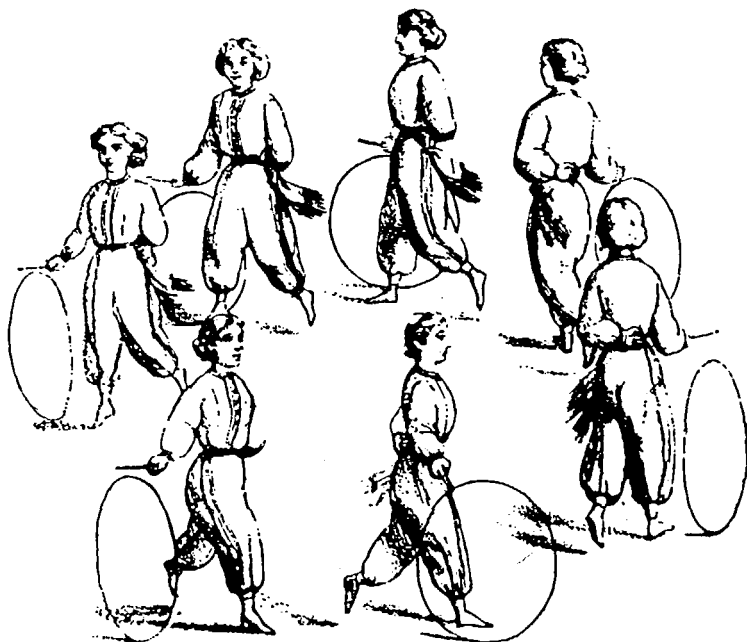
It is quite tempting to foreclose entirely the possibility of female spectatorship, to repeat at the level of theory the gesture of the photograph, given the history of a cinema which relies so heavily on voyeurism, fetishism, and identification with an ego ideal conceivable only in masculine terms. And, in fact, there has been a tendency to theorise femininity and hence the feminine gaze as repressed, and in its repression somehow irretrievable, the enigma constituted by Freud's question. Yet, as Michel Foucault has demonstrated, the repressive hypothesis on its own entails a very limited and simplistic notion of the working of power.³⁶ The 'no' of the father, the prohibition, is its only technique. In theories of repression there is no sense of the productiveness and positivity of power. Femininity is produced very precisely as a position within a network of power relations. And the growing insistence upon the elaboration of a theory of female spectatorship is indicative of the crucial necessity of understanding that position in order to dislocate it.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

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FASHION 'N' PASSION

A WORKING PAPER BY KATHY MYERS

89

ONE OF THE problems with the 'content analysis' of media images is its inability to take into account image construction as an evolving process.¹ This 'freeze frame' approach, whether applied to the moving picture or the still photograph, is always faced with a fundamental dilemma. On the one hand it seeks to classify and identify the dominant regime of codes and conventions which govern image production; and on the other, it needs to struggle constantly to keep abreast of the mutations in precisely those codes. The ability of the media continually to create new meanings gives a certain instability to the image, which constantly threatens to escape the analytic categories or stereotypes within which we seek to contain it. Yet this restlessness of the image, the search for the new, is not to be confused with a democratising of the visual market place. On the contrary, the proliferation of images suggests, for example, that in the case of the representation of women, the sites of exploitation are themselves multiple and shifting. Take, for instance, the ways in which notions of the positive or career orientated woman have been adopted by advertising to promote anything from a 'liberating' range of makeup to a building society account.

At any single moment, it is possible to compare the sexual and photographic conventions which determine, for example, how a woman will be represented in a pornographic image to the codes which structure how she will appear in a family snapshot or an advertisement for nappies. A few months later, one may find evidence of the incorporation of amateur family 'snapshotness' into an advertisement. Equally, notions of what constitute the 'professional photograph' may affect the ways in which individuals will pose for or photograph their friends. This trade-off of conventions is not to be confused with a blurring of boundaries. The discourses of the professional and the amateur photograph are distinct. What we need to examine is the nature of the economic and ideological structures which encourage an advertisement to deploy stylistic devices familiar in the snapshot. The same questions apply to a comparison I want to offer between pornographic and fashion images, specifically those published in magazines.

While arguing that different image systems influence each other, I

¹ This working paper is a follow-up to my article 'Towards a Feminist Erotica', *Camera*work, March 1982, no 24, pp 14-19. There I argued that different contexts tend to produce identifiable sexual discourses, and by extension, specific forms of pleasure and response for the reader. The point was illustrated with a comparison of a 'soft-core' pornographic image to a fashion advertisement for swim wear.

think it's important not to lose sight of the fact that the fashion image and the pornographic image are in the first instance produced within quite distinct sets of social and economic circumstances. Those differences affect the way in which the image is constructed as a commodity, as well as the pleasures it makes available.

A fashion advertisement in a magazine is, like any other, itself the sum of a system of commodity exchanges: printing costs, hiring of props, models' and copywriters' wages, etc. These transactions may affect the reader in terms of a higher price for the advertised product on the one hand; or a reduction in the price of the advertising medium (the magazine), on the other. However, this system of exchanges is concealed from the reader, since the advertisement never refers to the commodities involved in its own production.

One of the jobs of the advertising agency is to invent or enhance use values for the product. Within the space of the advertisement these use values will be translated into intelligible meanings. Through the creation of meaning, the advertisement works to simultaneously create identities for both the product and the reader, who will be addressed as a potential consumer. In order to engage the reader's attention, both text and image must be capable of offering certain forms of interest and pleasure. Crucially, for the image to fulfil its advertising function, it must not offer satisfaction in its own right. The advertisement works to displace satisfaction, promising fulfilment upon purchase of the commodity, at which point the reader becomes a consumer. It then articulates meaning and pleasure through a complex relationship which it establishes between reader, advertising image and commodity. This relationship is orchestrated by the overall marketing considerations, which determine not only where the advertisement will appear, but also where the commodity advertised will be distributed, retailed etc. These marketing considerations establish the necessary conditions for consumption to take place.

Clearly, the pornographic image does not fulfil the same functions as a fashion advertisement. It is not a promotional device to increase the sales of a commodity. Where part of the pleasure offered by the advertisement depends upon the future purchase of a commodity, the pleasure of pornography is effected in the present conjunction of image and reader made possible by a past purchase. Unlike the advertising image, the pornographic image does not demand that the reader buy a specified commodity as a guarantee of pleasure. The pornographic image is itself a commodity, and it addresses the reader as an already positioned consumer – a satisfied (and satisfiable) customer.

The Erotic Photograph

Certain forms of pornography have historically been labelled 'aesthetic' or 'erotic'. These terms have been deployed to defend sexually provocative or arousing imagery circulated within minority markets or interest

groups. The current proliferation of 'erotic' photography (e.g. David Bailey's *Trouble and Strife*², Helmut Newton's *Sleepless Nights*³ and John Hedgecoe's *Possessions*⁴) has enabled explicit allusions to sexual violence which would not be tolerated within the legal and political constraints which surround mass market 'soft' pornography.

In his acknowledgements for *Possessions*, Hedgecoe thanks: 'The owners and the occupants for the loan of their possessions', a reference to both the country house locations and the women who modelled in the photographic sessions. One of these images depicts a beautiful woman lying on the floor, her mouth gaping, like a beached goldfish, suffocating under the net of her captor. The only thing which escapes the net is fetishistic waves of golden hair. The image, like her life, is neatly truncated at the neck. The spectators are placed in a privileged sexual position above this woman. We survey her orgasmic death in the company of an anonymous man, whose shiny patent shoes peek menacingly into the top of the frame; an authoritative fetish which sexualises the dying woman's subordination. While explicit genital sexuality may be subject to censorship, explicit sexual violence it appears, is not.

² David Bailey, *Trouble and Strife*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1980.

³ Helmut Newton, *Sleepless Nights*, London, Quartet Books, 1978.

⁴ John Hedgecoe, *Possessions*, London, Mitchell Beazley, 1978.



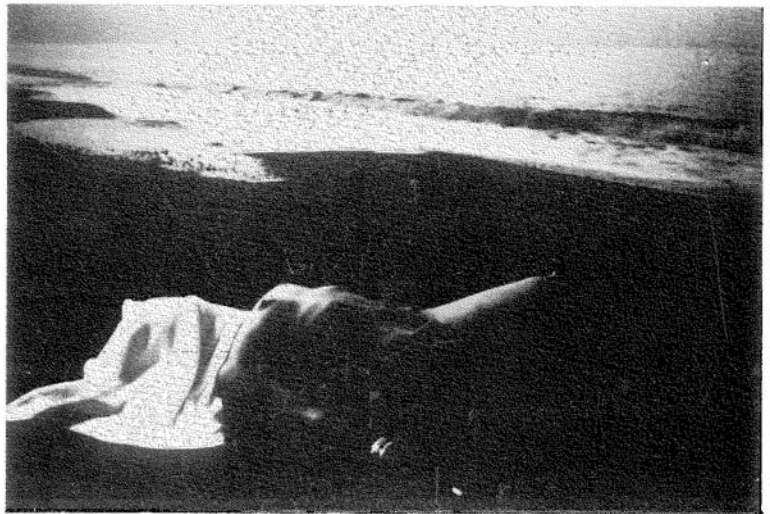
Orgasmic suffocation:
an 'erotic'
photograph from
John Hedgecoe's
'Possessions'.

One of the reasons for the exemption of so-called 'Erotica' from legal censorship is its location at the intersection of a number of different

visual discourses which continually compete for the interpretation of the image. These are the visual traditions established within fine art, commercial fashion photography and hardcore pornography. The inability easily to classify the erotic photograph lends it enough ambiguity to defy censorship under a current legal system which has established an effective exemption clause for that which is thought to be 'art'.

The photograph by Tim Brown appeared in the October 1981 issue of *Camera* entitled 'Erotic Masterpieces'. Like many 'erotic masterpieces' this image takes as its starting point the fine art tradition of the female nude established within oil painting. The woman's body is presented as aesthetic object to be surveyed and possessed, endowed with the capacity to sexually arouse. The body, as artistic prop, is also a licensed vehicle for individual artistic expression, a medium, as well as an object in its own right. What differentiates the fine art nude from the erotic photograph in Brown's eyes, is the capacity of the photograph to disrupt the tradition of nude representation by making strange the image: 'I thought the towel over her head would be disturbing, and I was right.' While fine art has developed its own tradition of representing the female form, erotic photographers such as Brown and Hedgecoe have taken their erotic inspiration from the domain of marginalised and usually heavily censored hard pornography. In the work of Hedgecoe and Brown we can trace the making safe, or the making acceptable, of many of the sensibilities of hard-core pornography. Here necrophilia, suffocation, decapitation, mutilation and sadism appear as condoned. The erotic photograph trades on a dubious tradition of sexual libertarianism which invests that which is censored with the power to disrupt and liberate. Hence the 'erotic'—whether it alludes to sadism, nihilism or whatever—is acclaimed as a sexually liberating force.

An 'erotic masterpiece' by Tim Brown from the October 1981 *Camera*.



The conventions of photographic erotica however, are not exclusively derived from fine art, nor from the development of soft-core or hard-core

pornography. The erotic photograph owes many of its formal devices to innovations created within the domain of commercial photography, and in particular fashion photography. It is interesting to note, for example, that two of its most celebrated practitioners, Helmut Newton and David Bailey, made their names in fashion. Fashion work occupies the prestigious end of commercial photography. The industry's seasonal demands for 'new fashion looks' and new modes of representation require both technical and stylistic innovation. Unlike other forms of commercial photography, fashion photography is auteuristic: David Bailey confers authorial prestige upon the fashion garments he chooses to shoot. The nude has been appropriated as the showcase for the photographic auteurs' work. Whereas the soft porn image is anonymous, the erotic image is authorised.

Fashion Erotica

While certain conventions drawn from the system of fashion photography have influenced the representation of the 'erotic nude' as photographic art, it can be argued equally that the codes and conventions of 'erotica' have influenced the construction of certain fashion images. Rosetta Brooks has argued that photographers like Guy Bourdin and Helmut Newton have applied the conventions of the erotic photograph in order to 'make strange' or challenge some of the 'stereotypical' notions of femininity and female sexuality which inform the dominant conventions of fashion photography. 'This emphasis upon the alien and artificial qualities of the picture make a straightforward accusation of sexism problematic... Newton manipulates existing stereotypes; their alienness is accentuated.'⁵ In the same way as this style purports to disrupt the conventions of the art-nude, so it can be seen to make strange the fashion image. Brooks suggests that this stylistic subversion is facilitated by making the photographer's mediation of the image apparent. In so doing, she argues, the photograph distanciates spectator from image, rendering any simplistic notion of identification impossible. She continues:

Many of his (Newton's) more successful photographs hold a distanciated engagement with the manipulative devices of fashion photography and with the process of mediation. Those alien features present in suppressed form in fashion photography and current images of women are exposed and foregrounded. The image is presented as alien: a threat rather than an invitation. Stereotypes are presented as a falsity.⁶

One of the central problems with Brooks' argument is the equation of distanciation with subversion. Yet an analysis of advertisements aimed at an 'upmarket' female readership can demonstrate that distanciation has been created as a new norm in fashion and beauty marketing. Not all forms of stereotype are dependent upon easy audience identification with the image, and not all distanciation subverts.

⁵ Rosetta Brooks, 'Fashion: Double Page Spread', *Camera*, January/February, 1980, no 17, p 2.

⁶ *ibid.*



Now, no one will know if it's you...
or our perfect makeup.

Revlon introduces
NEW FORMULA 2
The skin-responsive makeup.

FORMULA 2 moisturizes where your skin is dry.
FORMULA 2 blots where your skin is oily.
FORMULA 2 keeps you looking beautiful, fully soft at high noon or midnight indoors or out.
FORMULA 2 is fragrance-free.
MAKEUP A is for slightly oily and dry skin.
MAKEUP B is for normal and dry skin.

Formula 2 Makeup.
New from the Revlon Research Group.

Not the girl next door: mediation and distanciation in cosmetics advertising.

The advertisement for the Revlon cosmetic range 'Formula 2' was targeted marketed by the Grey agency at a 'sophisticated' female readership. The notion of sophistication is juxtaposed against that of 'accessibility'. In image terms 'accessible' images rely on a straightforward notion of audience identification, supposedly inducing reactions of 'I want to be like that'. The 'accessible' image will tend to use models who look like the friendly, smiling girl next door. By comparison the sophisticated image works to secure audience recognition of image as construct – image as image – without any immediate reference to the 'real' or to personal identity. It uses the image of the woman as a vehicle to deploy other kinds of codes and conventions. Often the 'sophisticated' image foregrounds itself in a readily identifiable cultural system, for example that of fine art painting, or in the case of Helmut Newton, avant garde erotic photography. The image of woman is used as a complex signifier to associate the advertised product with other aspects of the cultural and ideological system: art, status, wealth, etc.

The 'sophisticated' appeal of the Formula 2 advertisement is constructed through a series of devices which mediate and distanciate the spectator's relation to the image: the grid over the face; the use of portrait framing and pose; the figure's serenity, her acknowledgement of her to-be-looked-at-ness without recourse to the familiarity of a direct smile at the spectator. The image is constructed as a 'classic' beauty, derived as much from oil painting (with all its economic and ideological implications of rarity, cost, status, etc) as commercial 'packshot' photography.

This sort of *haute couture* distancing offers us an appropriate site for the 'accentuated alienness' which Brooks notes in Newton and Bourdin's work, including the now common use of sado-masochistic motifs. I would question her 'subversive' reading of such representations (a harsher look has been fairly easily incorporated into our notions of femininity via the influence of recent styles like punk). But a marketing strategy founded on reflexivity and deferred identification does problematise feminist interpretations of these images as simply and directly encouraging or condoning the activities represented.



'Subversive' sadism?
Fashion photography
by Hans Feurer in
the December 1981
Italian *Vogue*.

Soft-core Pornography and the Fashion Image

I have suggested that notions of hard-core pornography as mediated through auteuristic eroticism affect the form and presentation of certain up-market fashion images. I want to argue that the soft-core image, familiar in magazines such as *Knave* or *Penthouse*, displays a different kind of relationship with the fashion image. What characterises the soft-core image is its amazing resistance to stylistic innovations in the fashion field. Soft-core magazines are very similar in design, format, layout and choice of model. In appearance these models tend to conform to a very particular version of what is thought to be sexually desirable: long curly

hair, lightly tanned skins and a total lack of body hair—with the exception of neatly topiaried pubic growth. With their luxurious locks and toothy tanned looks, these models resemble nostalgic reappraisals of Farrah Fawcett Majors: an image which the women's fashion market abandoned in the mid-seventies. But the pleasure which this pornography offers its reader depends on this sense of sameness, identity and repetition. The soft-core magazine is itself a fetish form, resistant to change and stylistic innovation, which demands an amazing conservatism not only in the choice of model, but also in the poses and locations deemed acceptable.

Such images are neither signed by name nor identifiable photographic style. While most readers of soft porn will realise that the image is posed and constructed 'for their pleasure', it works on a principle of disavowal: 'I know it's constructed, but nevertheless...' To facilitate this disavowal, soft-core images tend to be made up, lit and tinted naturalistically. Readers are offered a version of the model's sexuality apparently unmediated by such devices as photographic innovation (flash light, blur, solarisation etc). Work on the image is denied rather than flaunted, as it might be in high fashion or erotic photography.

But the sexual codes which govern the representation of the soft porn image may also appear in certain areas of the fashion market: for example, the advertisements which appeared in the mid-seventies for Janet Reger underwear deploy the soft-focus vulnerability of contemporary centrefolds. The position of Janet Reger at the more expensive end of the naughty nightie market is complicated by the fact that its merchandise is bought by women, and by men for their female lovers. This differentiates the lingerie market from other aspects of women's fashion, and perhaps can help to explain the persistence here of romanticised photographic imagery which has been outmoded or superseded in other aspects of the trade.





Janet Reger's lingerie (opposite) meets soft-core pornography (above).

All this would suggest that different notions of the pornographic are at work in the construction of the female fashion image which can only be understood in relation to a detailed analysis of the construction of the respective markets for both. The ways in which female sexuality will be expressed are dependent not only on the context in which the image appears, but also on the intended target market for that image. While the deployment of sexual codes is continually subject to change and reorganisation, their alterations are far from arbitrary. An analysis of the representations of female sexuality could usefully attend not only to the range of codes and conventions through which they are constructed, but also to the economic and cultural rationales for their deployment.

'OUT OF THE BLUE' AND INTO THE BLACK

A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING BY CORINNE SQUIRE

¹ Chris Auty, *City Limits*, October 9-15, 1981, p 9.

IN MANY WAYS *Out of the Blue*, released in Britain last year, is an unremarkable commercial film. But critics writing in the British press agreed that *disruption* was its most significant feature. It seemed fragmentary to them, 'projecting raggedness'¹. Disruptive meanings are still often overlooked in the analysis of commercial films, although they must be recognised in some way by many who see the films. I want to look at places in this film where saleable regularities are set up and disrupted at the same time. I am going to use a psychoanalytic account, because this deals with both aspects; it captures desire, but always so incompletely that it seems as if it might articulate itself elsewhere. And I shall structure the piece around the incest in the film, which attracts and yet problematises a number of psychoanalytic categories: narcissism, the phallus, fetishism and femininity.

The conventional truths of *Out of the Blue* emerge within a family romance. The narrative is structured round a single person, a child of about thirteen called 'CeBe', and the relations between her and one, two, or three others: her mother, her father, and her father's friend Charlie. In this framework, the pursuit of narcissism even to death, which is at the centre of the film, is tied to the getting of adult sexuality. This entails the loss of childhood narcissism, which in the film is fatally recaptured in incest.

This content is not in itself what makes a psychoanalytic approach valuable, for there are other unifying meanings in the film. Specific social codes are tapped; for instance, a confrontation is sketched between punk and late '60s culture. Cinematic conventions of meaning intrude when the genres of road-movie and family drama, and the figures of streetsharp kid and Lolita, meet and clash. And the actors import their own codes, built up in other films; Linda Manz that of an innocent wise

child, Dennis Hopper that of a doomed subversive. As the director, too, Hopper brings echoes of his other work to the viewer. In Britain *Out of the Blue* is most likely to be seen in the context of *Easy Rider*. Although they deal with different historical situations, both films draw on youth culture and focus romantically on self-destruction.

Categories of meaning like these are disrupted by their reiteration in the film, even when they only seem to be repeating themselves. But the film is broken up far more noticeably *within* the text of meanings which it produces as it unfolds. The narrative, and the positions of characters within it, do not always pay attention to traditional rules of plot and character development. Sometimes the film simply cannot be understood. Even at the end, it is not possible to make one sense, or any finite number of senses, out of it.

These difficulties are present to some extent in any film. The knowledge we get from the unfolding text of a film is cumulative but always changing, restructured retrospectively after each frame (so I'm not going to attempt a prefacing outline of *Out of the Blue*, which would check this movement, here). And every film is problematised by the structuring events it has to leave outside its text, by all it cannot show. In *Out of the Blue* these difficulties converge on incest. The child's memory places the first occurrence of incest before the filmed events. Even our attempts to snatch knowledge from within the text are challenged by the uncertainty that the revelation of incest produces. Has incest occurred within the film before it is revealed to us? Did we miss it, or was it concealed in some metaphor we could not connect with?

It is this questioning of knowledge through incest that seems to make a psychoanalytic approach useful. For Freud, the incest taboo receives its meaning from an adult sexuality that is not known to the child who suffers the prohibition, that can only ever be known imperfectly and in retrospect. This dislocated moment of initiation makes all knowledge incomplete and leaves marks on every text, like the lines of narrative fracture in *Out of the Blue*. As Lacan argues, knowledge begins with language, which gives the Name of the Father, the first phallic signifier, to a sexual difference which is not yet known to the child. So language provides an absolute meaning, yet it also holds, in its own uncertain structures, a desire for knowledge of the other sexual difference, irreducible to the phallus, which always escapes.

Freud was describing the dominant sexual order, within which the phallus signifies a social power which cannot be separated from biological meaning. Entry to the symbolic order involves acknowledging this single, masculinised power. The narcissistic oscillation between identification and isolation, omnipotence and obliteration, which takes diverse foci in infants, is appropriated by the phallus from the time that the Oedipus complex is resolved; and the uncertainty of sexual knowledge also has to be held under this signifier. When adult sexuality is assumed at puberty, problems with this development start to appear.

These two lines are followed in *Out of the Blue*, firstly in a continuous phallic presence, and secondly in silence or confusion about the absence

² For one exposition of this, see Chantal Maillet and Sylvie Leger, 'Jouissance and Division', *Semiotext(e)* (1981), vol 4 no 1, 'Polysexuality', pp 219-227.

of the phallus. In certain places the narcissistic structure of the text seems overplayed or incomplete. Here the unity of the subject under the sign of the phallus comes into question and the film moves away from its unifying elements, 'out of the blue and into the black'. This line, which recurs in Neil Young's theme song, and is cut short in its title, describes the nihilist movement of the film towards self-destruction; and another move, whose relationship to the first will become clear later, towards fixing the uncertainty of sexual knowledge in a femininity which is simply a black hole, a terrible inversion of the ideal phallus. At times this definition of femininity overreaches itself, or fails. Then the film moves into a different black, into what Freud called the 'dark continent' of female sexuality, which insists on existing beyond phallic discourse, and beyond all mystifications of femininity.²

I want to look first at the dominance the phallus assumes indirectly in the film through incest, and at how this is broken up.

The incest in *Out of the Blue* is like an analysis, because the meanings it produces never seem to be finished. And yet, after the shock of its revelation, the film yields to an initial interpretation in which incest has the determining place. All the sexuality in the film is regrouped around the last scenes; and we remember particular events which seem to have foreshadowed the knowledge we now have.

In the early part of the movie, CeBe wanders purposelessly in childish, unsexed, narcissistic innocence. She sucks her thumb in the midst of corruption, she pisses around nightspots with her friends, distinct from that world and untouched by it. Events occur without worrying motive, sadly and nostalgically structured around the 'accident' of the crash. Even the position of the camera/viewer causes little concern: the film seems simply to show itself or be shown.

But the penultimate scene of the film shows CeBe menacing her silent and completely passive father, after he and his friend Charlie have failed to carry out their plan to rape her. She asks him if he remembers what he used to do before the crash, pulls his head down by the hair to force him to see and smell her cunt, and then stabs him.

The last shot of this scene is a pornographic composition of CeBe's bare legs straddling her father's bloodstained body, taken from a groveling position near the floor. The intimate place of the camera is suddenly explicit, and it retrospectively invests the whole of her childhood in the film. The camera was always in a close relation with her, lingering over her face, following her around and building up in the viewer a fantasy of her sexual history. The Lolita genre is now brought out for full recognition in a voyeuristic relation of camera to child, or viewer to child, which is uncomfortably explicit, measured against the faint traces of sexuality usually admitted by the camera-voyeur.

Earlier scenes gather round this new meaning like warnings. CeBe in her father's car was asked if she remembers the good times before the crash, and the fun they used to have. CeBe in her father's lorry was kissing him and he was asking her 'Am I as sexy as Elvis?' before the crash with the school bus which sent him to prison. There is, too, a movement

of desire between its objects in the early part of the film, when the father's friend eyes up CeBe's own girlfriends; and in the opposite direction, when CeBe watches from outside the house a displacement of the primal scene played out between her mother and her father's friend. CeBe visits her father at the prison, with her mother, and the visit is shot not around husband and wife, but around father and daughter, who are like lovers. CeBe's mother asks 'Aren't you pleased your father's coming home?' and the child says 'Yes', in a piece of acting where all that is spoken seems to be an awareness of simulation, of the act of acting. Finally, the analyst to whom CeBe is taken says 'There's something you haven't told me,' and he and CeBe look at each other in a silence which is explained by the revelation of incest.



Mirror partners:
CeBe visits her father
in prison.

But this particular gap is not completely filled by the incest, for uncertainty is prolonged by the position of the analyst. He is played by Raymond Burr, often identified with his TV part as the disabled detective in *Ironside*. On TV the character's disablement is used to signify heroism and more subtly to evoke a sadistic delight in mutilation in the viewer. This delight is transparently transferred to the film; a titter accompanied the analyst's appearance, a comment on the incongruity of finding an impotent in a position of authority. Burr's acting, more melodramatic than that of the others in the cast, reveals more, but does not carry the weight of the unspoken. It is as if the incest is deflected from being a complete truth by farce. The phallus, the signifier around whose power the incest taboo operates, is mocked here in the person of the analyst. But its presence is never shifted for long.

The phallus finds its centrality in this film in relations between men. *Out of the Blue* returns to these again and again. The relation of CeBe's

father to her mother is largely structured through Charlie, her father's friend. Charlie and her father, not her father and mother, dance together at the party after his release. Their narcissistic bond takes over their interests in women: first CeBe's mother, then CeBe herself, become shared objects for them.

CeBe and her father also have a relationship of familiars, and CeBe is masculinised within it, as all elements of a post-Oedipal narcissism must be. The camera watches her dressing up as Elvis, and her other acts in the private space of her room. It could be Elvis, or CeBe as Elvis, that her father desires when in the first scene he asks her: 'Am I as sexy as Elvis?' He calls her 'Tiger', tells her always to fight back. He prohibits her phallic narcissism, her drums and her Elvis clothes; and yet he leaves her the model of the lorry he used to drive, ambivalently allowing her to keep the phallus with which she will kill him.

The fact of sexual knowledge, through the incest, is always present in this game. And so it is as a female child, not just as a narcissistically sexual child, that CeBe must appear: as the horror of phallic absence as well as the image of phallic presence. This only becomes clear near the end of the film, where in one room under the camera's stare the father's friend gets off with the father's wife, while in the other the father drunkenly rages that his daughter must be fucked to make a woman out of her. This offer, like the incest itself, takes place out of the film's sight. His friend accepts it, so the negotiation establishes CeBe as the second woman they hold in common. And it forces CeBe out of the game of narcissism, in which she is an extension of her father, into femininity. Charlie, not CeBe, remains the father's mirror partner. Incest is always ambiguous in this respect. Its close narcissistic intimacy is the result of a blood relation, which is itself the result of the sexual difference whose recognition problematises narcissism for ever.



Mirror partners:
CeBe's father with
his friend Charlie.

Incest can never be fully narcissistic, nor can it avoid narcissism completely. CeBe's father can only make her a woman by getting *another* man to fuck her, which establishes phallic continuity between the men at the same time as it drives her out. The question of why he wants her to be a woman clarifies the *phallic* essence of narcissism. For femininity is the last stake in the game of having and not having the phallus, within which narcissistic pleasure is taken.

Even CeBe's murder of her father, and of herself and her mother in the lorry in the next scene, becomes a supplement to the structuring knowledge of the phallus. In killing the children in the bus, CeBe's father displacedly killed the child CeBe and himself as her father, as he did in the incest. The secret of sexual knowledge between him and CeBe is only acknowledged at the end of the film. It both divides them utterly and unites them in the continuous presence of the phallus. One of them has to go, so that the other can narcissistically be both. CeBe kills her father and takes his place as the phallus.

The only way to escape the sexual division, since it structures life itself, is death. Death and narcissism belong to a phantasy of undifferentiated sexuality which closes off sexual difference. Death is a phantasy of supreme sexuality, a final surfeit of phallic pleasure. The deaths at the end of the movie stand for the ultimate narcissistic orgasm. Death takes over at the end of *Out of the Blue*, but it, like the phallus, has been present all along.

At the beginning of the film, CeBe says she wants to die because Sid Vicious and Elvis are dead. Elvis' death is placed as the event immediately preceding the timespan of the film, and is the concern of its third sequence, following the crash sequence and the shots of CeBe and her mother. And the film begins and ends with CeBe in the lorry hammering out slogans: Elvis Lives, Punk Rules, Disco Sucks. Punks in this film take on the meaning of anarchy, like hippies in *Easy Rider*, although punk does not display their visual specificity, or the specificity it had in Britain. And the two forms of subversion are in conflict. CeBe confronts an ageing hippie, who falls silent when she says 'Kill all hippies'. And Hopper seems in this film to kill off the shorthand sign of subversion that *Easy Rider* and he himself became, as if the film is his death wish. As CeBe's father, he plays the most determining part in the structure of the film, particularly as he also represents Elvis who does not appear. CeBe's lament for Elvis' death at the beginning of the film is also a lament for him in prison, as good as dead. They have both come premonitorily close to death in the crash. The death of the children stands for the death of CeBe, who should have been on the bus with them; but it also stands through her for the death of her father, in their perfect incestuous union. There is community between CeBe and her father, as there is between CeBe, Elvis and the punks. She is identified with them, so they live on in her when she signals her immortality in her omnipotent self-destruction. This perfect repetition of anarchies, always moving towards self-immolation, structures one level of the narcissistic unity of the film. But Dennis Hopper the director, outlives Dennis Hopper the actor, and goes

on to make the rest of the film; and it is interesting to speculate on how the authority and authorship of the film must change here.

CeBe's infantile dream, in which her omnipotent desires are always obeyed by their objects even when this entails death, is played out in the film's narrative, which destroys itself in premonition, repetition and reconstruction. Death is very close to narrative, for the end is continuously and teleologically present within it. *Out of the Blue* like *Easy Rider* is about travelling to arrive apocalyptically, and the end is written over many of its images. Sometimes this writing is so intrusive that it becomes like a phantasy of narrative. What was a single shot in *Easy Rider* – the random, almost subliminal, interpellation of the final crash – becomes here the principle of the film. *Out of the Blue* begins with a lorry crashing, and ends with a lorry exploding. In the second scene of the film, the child CeBe, the object around which the film centres itself, tells her mother that she wants to die and take everyone she loves with her, and this is indeed how the film finishes. Even the opening shots of the lorry hurtling towards the school bus are interspersed with shots of CeBe in the wrecked cab, where she goes at the end of the film to blow herself and her mother up.

But death really takes over the film where the incest is revealed. It is as if this revelation completes all knowledge, and closes up the structure of the film to such an extent that only an apocalypse is possible. The incest functions as a kind of perfect knowledge that denies all the questions of sexual difference. The perpetual doubt that invested the earlier parts of the film is finally refused, and guilt is converted simply into violence. This change is begun when CeBe's father and his friend beat up the man who proclaims the father's guilt as the killer of his and other children. Suddenly the father changes from the last victim of an accidental tragedy, to an active agent, serving himself. His blows to the accusing Other destroy the reality of his guilt and leave his narcissism intact. The downward-swooping blow that he and Charlie strike is oddly recalled when CeBe stabs him, and negates the statement of her violated narcissism that his existence constitutes.

The attack nevertheless does not allow a completely clear reading. The victim has a briefcase of money, which the men take. This produces one of the most noticeable disjunctions in the whole film; for the viewer cannot discover if or how they knew about the money, that is, what the true relationship between the three men is. Knowledge comes illogically, as if in a dream, making it impossible to identify smoothly with the figures in the film. This is another denial of knowledge which the film viewer suffers and which is suffered in incest itself and in the exploration of all sexual difference, for which any name such as 'phallus' will always be insufficient. In this film, it is what develops in the space where the phallus is not, that most disrupts phallic definitions. This is usually named femininity.

Femininity in this film, is, first of all, the affirmation of the phallus by recognising its lack. This absence may be invested with incredible power – the power of the super-real maternal phallus phantasised by the infant

—or of its horrifying negation. This is the power which kills CeBe's father, and drives the fetishist porno image and sadomasochistic phantasy. The film is crammed with images of femininity oscillating between awe and horror. The relations between the two most central women, CeBe and her mother, are constructed, either with CeBe taking the masculine judgemental position, according to which her mother is a junkie, vacant, crazy and stupid; or with both CeBe and her mother being women, that is, talking about men. Their girtalk obsessively revolves around absent men, around their own sexual holes; from the mother telling her child at the beginning that 'There are two kinds of men, honey, providers and—men'; to the scene in CeBe's bedroom, where threatened by rape she clings to her mother and sobs that she hates all men, and her mother says 'I know, honey.' The relations between the women here take meaning as a lesbianism constructed solely for male pleasure in its overthrow, in which the stably feminine mother ultimately complies with CeBe's rape, shrieking she doesn't want her to be a dyke. The incest which drives the movie is in a sense derived from this male phantasy of mother-daughter incest, an absolutely unknowable form of sexuality.

Reviewers of *Out of the Blue* called it 'hysterical'. This dismisses the film by feminising it, and it also establishes a link between hysteria's flouting of scientific causality, and the dislocations and paralyses in the film's text. It is important to distinguish the two, and Freud's footnote on fetishism in 'Three Essays on Sexuality' seems useful here.³ The camera, like the voyeuristic gaze of the small child Freud describes searching for sexual knowledge, may fix on and fetishise a displaced object under the necessity for repression. Fetishism, which arises from the disavowal of phallic absence, intrudes into the film's narcissistic movement.⁴ It reaches a final stasis when the image of the phallic woman straddling the fallen man paralyses the camera.⁵ After this, only a fatal consummation is possible. The camera has been checked before, but its voyeuristic movement was never halted. For phallic absence does not engulf the voyeur; the distance between viewer and the object of the gaze is maintained, and this allows sexual difference, as Willemen emphasises, to look back. The camera-voyeur moves out of the blue and into the black because it moves in the incompleteness of sexual knowledge, which is a space, not a hole; a place of difference, not of fetishist identity. Here, a different sense of femininity can develop.

In this space, women are often not quite caught in a phallic definition, or are caught so perfectly that they begin to generate contradictions. CeBe's sexual definition is too ambiguous to be held within narcissism. She daydreams for instance of travelling, and in this representation of her desire for her father, travel is endless. But her real travelling in the film is directed to her mother. It is prosaic, not euphoric, by hitchhiking, in taxis, on foot, alone. It can be diverted, it is not linear, it stops; but it has no destiny. It is like travelling for women in Akerman's films, a challenge at every moment of movement.

Often in this film travel brings CeBe home to her mother, from whom

³ Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on Sexuality', *Collected Works* vol 7, London, Hogarth Press, 1974, p 155.

⁴ See the discussion of this in Paul Willemen, 'Letter to John', *Screen*, Summer 1980, vol 21 no 2, pp 56-7.

⁵ On the special relations of fetishism and drawing, and voyeurism and film, see Martin Briggs, 'Drawing: the Master and the Slave', *ZG* no 2, 1980.

she is separated by men. The most obvious meaning of this separation is that the mother's uncontrollable sexuality leads her to neglect her child, her most important stake in masculinity. But the mother, who is presented as guaranteeing the phallic order through her lack of the phallus, has to be the representative, not only of multitudes of vices, but also of contradictory values: of positive femininity as well as penis envy, good mothering as well as nymphomania. CeBe appeals to her mother to take her home from the analyst, and she does so, giving her the protection she needs. The mother seems the stablest feminine element in the film. Yet her violent oscillations between nymphomania and virtue provoke laughter, and at this sound the uncomplicated phallic phantasy of women dissolves.

The mother's parodic femininity and CeBe's too-great, too-ambivalent narcissism, together distort the film's unified structure. An impossible leap of credulity is needed to reconcile all the phallic pictures of their relationship: as a hierarchy which CeBe dominates; as lesbianism; as mothering. These images can only belong together in a phallic definition of femininity if they are collapsed into one; why then should the film be preoccupied with repetitions of the same? Why should it be disjointed, instead of proceeding smoothly from one phallic phantasy to the next? It always seems to be trying to place itself somewhere other than where it is. In an early scene, where CeBe and her mother are discussing her father, the uneasiness between them is a forewarning of incest. But there is something strained in all the scenes between these two before the father enters the present of the film – as if they are getting to know each other outside the triangle he defines. The hint of sexual difference surpassing the phallic is strong in this, but always lost; for once the Other of sexual difference is named, it becomes the Same.

Out of the Blue is a film about childhood, narcissism, incest, and death. But to set out these terms is to say too much. I have put a frame around it, but although *Out of the Blue* can be read like this, it is less closed by conventions of narrative than many films. Its most unifying meanings are broken up, and fracture is its most obvious feature. But none of its dislocations can be held onto outside its text.

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SIMON WATNEY EXPLORES SOME
RECENT 'GAY' SCENARIOS

A STARK CAPTION appears at the beginning of *Cruising*: 'This film is not intended as an indictment of the homosexual world. It is set in a small segment of that world, which is not representative of the whole.' Twentieth Century Fox's publicity notes apologise for *Making Love* in an equally didactic manner, informing us that 'Claire and Zack Elliot have the perfect marriage,' and directing us to their preferred reading of the film which, we learn, is about the couple's 'courage in facing the truth about their future when Zack discovers he is attracted to another man after eight years of marriage to a woman he loves'. While the films construct homosexuality in radically different ways, it can be argued that they in fact call upon a shared set of attitudes towards sexuality, which are continually being negotiated in the fictive person of the homosexual. These two statements reveal a series of alignments and ideological imperatives which tend to be overlooked within the dominant theoretical perspective around stereotyping. Do the makers of *Cruising*, for example, wish to remind us of the controversy surrounding its filming and distribution, and do they mean us to view their rubric as an explanation or a placation, or perhaps both? What are the implications for film-makers and audiences of thinking of a 'homosexual world' and, if that world is divided into 'segments', how does that affect possible significations of (male) homosexuality? What are the material conditions governing the production and regulation of images of gay men, and do these images differ significantly between differently-financed types of film?

In this article I want to explore these questions, concentrating as a gay man on images of male homosexuality, if this indeed is what they are, bearing in mind Jeffrey Weeks' observation that it is 'presumptuous to

¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, London, Longmans, 1981, p 116.

² Richard Dyer, 'Stereotyping', in *Gays and Film*, ed Richard Dyer, London, British Film Institute, 1977, p 31.

³ Richard Dyer, *ibid*, p 30.

attempt to explore female homosexuality in terms of categories derived from male experience'.¹ Although he is addressing the larger question of historical research, the argument remains valid for film studies.

Most recent discussions of homosexuality and cinema have been organised around the concept of stereotyping, as marked out in Richard Dyer's seminal essay of 1977.² Dyer argued forcibly that 'what we should be attacking in stereotypes is the attempt of heterosexual society to define us for ourselves, in terms that inevitably fall short of the "ideal" of heterosexuality (that is, taken to be the norm of being human), and to pass this definition off as necessary and natural.' His work correctly prioritises a concern with the practical consequences of the dominant patterns used to signify sexual 'deviants' in relation to the cultural acquisition of lesbian and gay identities. It stresses the distinction between sexual behaviour and social identity which has been central to interactionist analyses of sexuality. This approach has been highly successful in tracing the processes in film whereby sexual relations have been employed as if they clearly and adequately expressed social relationships. It has, however, tended to encourage a drift into distinctions between supposedly 'true' and 'false' representations of homosexuality, as if there were some ideologically 'correct' way of signifying gays without fundamentally challenging or affecting the overall construction of gender roles—that which is taken to be 'appropriate' to women and men—in film as a whole.

The major problem with theories of stereotyping is that they concentrate on individual images or motifs to the exclusion of the *active* role of the viewer. For a stereotype is rarely simply a misrepresentation; it is almost invariably a site of ideological contestation, a site of conflict between incompatible pictures of what it means to be gay, black, an old woman, and so on. To identify a stereotype is to signal one's rejection of a particular image, usually of oneself. It is to refuse an identification to which one has been interpellated. It therefore involves both recognition and refusal.

But to halt analysis at this moment of struggle prevents any full means for considering *either* the larger socio-economic framework by which the image or motif is motivated, or the equally complex subjective (but none the less social) processes whereby we evaluate our own positions in relation to visual material. The strength of stereotyping theories lies in their emphasis on the immediacy of power relations within sign-systems. Thus Dyer writes perceptively that 'in stereotyping the dominant group apply their norms to subordinate groups, find the latter wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque and hence reinforce the dominant group's sense of the legitimacy of their domination.'³ However, we still need to consider the actual mechanisms of subordination, the complex historical process whereby sexual categories come into being, are adapted to changing circumstances, become problematised and eventually replaced.

In this respect the entire question of homosexuality 'in' film cannot adequately be dealt with in *quantitative* terms. Rather we need to con-

sider how different definitions of masculinity are constructed and reconstructed across genres and across modes of production. This requires an understanding of the ways in which film constructs a 'regime of truth' concerning gender relations, a regime which strategically selects and recruits particular versions of gay social life and sexuality to the purposes and advantage of a social system which is massively dependent on the economic inequality between women and men, naturalised and regulated through the cultural codes of gendering. These codes continually align gay men against the hierarchical forms of masculinity and femininity, forms which are reinforced *both* by our various resemblances to, and differences from, their prescriptive definitions. A series of recent films have purported to expand the representation of homosexuality in the direction of the actual multiplicity of subcultures which have developed in the wake of the gay liberation movements of the early 1970s. I want to concentrate on two of these, *Cruising* and *Making Love*, and to demonstrate how, despite the wide differences of sexual iconography and genres, both films continue to sustain the values of heterosexual gender relations, and are prevented from offering any real critique of them.

CRUISING

In *Cruising* Al Pacino plays an undercover policeman, Steve Burns, who is assigned to track down a killer busily slaying Pacino look-alikes. It is ostensibly a cops-and-robbers movie, and belongs to a group of films from the '70s which includes *Mean Streets*, *The Warriors*, and *Serpico* (in which Pacino had already been subjected to a homosexual rape). These all depict the social life of individual urban subcultures with maximum exotic ethnicity, relying heavily on our partial incomprehension of particular customs and argot for realistic effect, and in order to show these subcultures as 'foreign' and outside the Great American Way of Life. In this manner they are prevented from offering any real political critique of the unifying notion of the *United States*. They are also able to present extremes of sex and violence, and poverty, in such a way that these are seen as symptomatic of the individual subcultures rather than the results of economic exploitation. Hence *Cruising* is set on the New York leather-bar scene, a picturesque gay underworld which parallels precinct consciousness with a territorialism defined by sexual desire. This is shown as an infernal domain, and the film depicts 'in as much detail as a general audience film will allow, scenes of fist-fucking, anal sex, and elaborate sadomasochism'⁴. The effect of censorship in Britain only serves to col-lude with the sly Peeping-Tomism of the camerawork, which contributes greatly to the film's overall mystification of its environment, and the sexual activity which takes place.

Pacino is sent out into this 'gay world' in much the same way that the US marines are sent out to face the aliens at the end of *Close Encounters*. At least the film gets its iconography right, and we are spared the hilar-

⁴ Vito Russo, 'Warning: This Film Could Seriously Damage Your Health', *Gay News*, May 1 1980, no 190.

ious spectacle which Hollywood usually offers us of an all-purpose gay scene in which '40s hoods grunt gruffly into the bejewelled ears of '50s drag-queens, while heavyweight '60s cowboys waltz slowly through the middle distance locked in the unconvincing embraces of '70s leather-men.

The murderer is finally revealed as (you guessed it) a *repressed gay*, who has been advised to do away with himself by his all-American Pa, but takes instead to butchering look-alikes. At this point the notion of homosexuality-as-Narcissism is already implicit, if we are to understand what the original novel implied, namely that he is killing his own desire. In the book the killer never has sex with his victims. In the film we are cheerfully informed, with the full authority of the familiar cinematic discourse of forensic science, that while the victims show evidence of anal intercourse, with traces of 'seminal fluid', there was no actual sperm to be found. In this way another ideological slippage concerning homosexuality is constructed, between repression and violence on the one hand, and between physical disorder and psychopathy on the other. Not surprisingly *Cruising* relies heavily on the contagion theory of homosexuality. For Pacino, in a highly scissored and ambiguous dénouement, is revealed to have taken over the by-now dead killer's personality, or 'instinct', or sexuality, or whatever, having slaughtered the only gay man with whom he had hitherto enjoyed any kind of pleasurable social relationship. The negative implications here for what homosexuality 'does' to a man are legion, especially since it is stressed that this last victim, unlike the others, contained (horror of horrors!) sperm. We have also crossed genres into the fashionable constituency of 'Possession' movies, as pioneered by director William Friedkin's earlier blockbuster, *The Exorcist*. The film ends with Pacino shaving in his girl-friend's pristine apartment, all white in contrast to the crepuscular darkness of the 'gay world', while she casually dons his leather 'disguise' bit by bit over her white nightdress—dark glasses, peaked cap, motorcycle jacket... Indeed, the increasing violence in their love-making scenes, which are interspersed throughout the film, are presumably intended as illustrations of the 'contagion' process, as well as anticipating the Jekyll and Hyde conclusion.

The major issue in *Cruising* is not whether sadomasochism is 'representative' of gays, or whether a leather-man is a stereotype, but rather how certain forms of gay sexual activity are positioned and evaluated against heterosexual norms. *Cruising* posits a banal equation between actual violence and the signs of various versions of masculinity donned for the gay scene. At the same time it is highly ambiguous in its attitude to masculinity as such. In one sequence we are positioned in the dark back-room of a typical New York gay club, a room expressly designed for casual anonymous sex between willing partners. The next victim watches a coin-in-the-slot porn film, while the killer lurks in the best horror film tradition between us and him. His hand is suddenly profiled in shadow against the screen within the screen, clutching the dagger of true melodrama, and the sequence ends with a bloody nickel being

pushed into the slot by the murderer, and the porn film cranking back into an imitation of life across the blood drenched screen. Are we intended to relate the flogging scene in the porn film to the killer's mentality, to the 'world of gays', or perhaps ironically to *Cruising* itself? Given the cinematic obsession with the aetiology (or 'causes') of homosexuality, the former seems more likely.

It is precisely the casual, repetitive slippage from 'gay' to 'violence' which is so offensive and dangerous in *Cruising*. What urgently needs to be considered are the ways in which we are *all* recruited to sexual-fantasies by images which are both available and erotically charged in relation to our actual lived experience. *Cruising* depicts the organised society of a group of men whose sexualised fantasies of theatrical power relationships are, in a crucial sense, voluntary. What is more, these relationships are mutable. There is certainly no one-to-one relation between sexual role-play and the hyper-maleness of the leather gender-identity. Indeed, the leather subculture is both a response to the historical association of homosexuality with 'effeminacy', as well as a subversion of the *original* connotations of the style which it takes over, 'on approval' as it were, from the world of heterosexual masculinity. Its contradiction lies in the fact that to non-gays, and women in particular, it cannot easily be dissociated from the patriarchal significations of heterosexual experience. In filmic terms however it merely permits an irresponsible ideological movement from gay to violence to sudden death, as in Boris Szulzinger's



Cruising in the shadows: from homosexuality to homicide.

The Lonely Killers, and many other such films in which homosexuality only features to 'explain' an otherwise gratuitous tendency to slaughter. The infinitely potent image of victimisation – the objective experience that all gay men experience and must somehow negotiate – is presented in *Cruising* as if it stems *naturally* from the very fact of homosexual desire, and is used as if it actually explained something fundamental about homosexuality to non-gays. *Cruising* reinforces the view that homosexuality is *intrinsically* a problem, something which requires regulation and policing, in order to protect the non-gay world from moral 'pollution'.

For the makers of *Cruising* the gay scene is simply 'there', like Brooklyn, or Islington, or The Bronx. It is never recognised as a response to a complex history and geography of legislative and social exclusions, pushed into areas of economic devastation in most major cities, the signs of which are once more read off as a 'natural' aspect of homosexuality itself. This *physical* marginalisation of the 'gay world' also ensures that it is never seen in direct overall confrontation with the dominant norms of ideal American gender roles or householding patterns. It isn't at all clear whether Pacino is actually having sex with other men in the course of his investigation or how an ordinary policeman fits into a milieu of high price bars.

And just as violence is viewed as a product of homosexuality rather than something which is constantly directed at it, so cruising itself is invested with the maximum of sinister and dubious connotations. This is particularly obnoxious in a film about the violent murdering of gay men. In the midst of all this Pacino is cast as the innocent abroad. At one point he enquires in a shop about the back pocket colour-code of handkerchiefs, and reels out in a state of shock before the salesmen began to get round to the really interesting ones! But whenever the film starts to become aware of its own conflicting attitudes towards masculinity, we are hastily deflected back into the safe discourses of sexual repression, and the ever available moral panic evoked by homosexuality when it is presented as a domain of pure sex. This is why New York gays organised so speedily against the film's location shooting in and around Greenwich Village, and why one demonstrator enquired of the city officials what would happen if a producer tried to re-make *The Birth of a Nation* in Harlem, using black extras. As I have suggested, the point of such objections cannot be established simply around notions of misrepresentation, or stereotyping, but against the tendency to evaluate gay male sub-cultures through heterosexually defined definitions of gender which they contest.

According to *Cruising*, homosexuality may be an alternative, but it is an alternative which *kills*. It leads to the death of gay men who overstep the threshold of traditional pictures of what it means to be gay, and to the moral destruction of any heterosexual exposed to its diabolic temptations for too long. By confusing fantasy violence and its representation with the real thing, *Cruising* effectively closes down any consideration of the continual struggle on the part of lesbians and gays to define our own

social relations and sexual pleasures. In this respect it does for gay men what *Looking For Mr Goodbar* did for women. In that film violent death was established as the just deserts for those who stray out after dark, a woman's place, of course, being at home. Both films also go to great lengths to establish the murderer's motives in relation to some repressed and implicitly violent homosexuality, rather than to the neurosis which all gendering becomes when pushed to extremes. In *Looking For Mr Goodbar*, we see the heroine, Teresa, systematically destroyed by her appalling macho catholic father, and a host of other male heterosexuals. Yet it is a gay man who is hastily inserted to do the actual bumping off, stabbing her as he fucks her 'in anum', while trying to prove his 'masculinity'. The first murder in *Cruising* is a notable – if bloodier – reprise of this scene.

MAKING LOVE

While *Cruising* is set in the mythically simplified sexual underworld of New York City, *Making Love* transports us to a geographically unspecified middle class suburbia, a Lacoste labelled world of casual affluence. And instead of cops-and-robbers, we are faced immediately with the Eternal Triangle. Claire and Zack Elliott are happily house-hunting in the best traditions of upward social mobility. They are both painfully 'nice', he a doctor and she a successful television executive. He stays awake at night worrying about his patients. She wants to introduce an inter-racial relationship into a soap-opera. This may be the script-writer's little joke, since – despite a reported thirteen million dollar cost – the film's production values, casting (Kate Jackson from *Charlie's Angels* as Claire) and narrative (emphasising the abandoned wife's position) are redolent of TV melodrama. It thus emerges as a 'Woman's Film' with, as the advertisers put it, 'a gay look'⁵, as exemplified in the poster campaign, using Richard Avedon's photography, and a slogan which explicitly addresses women: 'After eight happy years of marriage Claire Elliott is discovering there's someone new in her husband's life.' The adverts position us from within marriage, rather than from the vantage point of Zack or Bart.

As the estate agent describes the Elliotts' ideal home, it's 'so traditional, so contemporary'. Much the same could be said of *Making Love*. The Elliotts are traditional in so far as they like Gilbert and Sullivan operas and want to call their (suspicion! clue!) still unconceived child, Rupert, as in Brooke. In fact they have 'Culture' in much the same way that Friedkin's sweaty leather-men have violence – by nature. They are contemporary to the extent that they have problems. Unbeknown to Claire, Zack is taking off on a series of totally unexplained car trips around the local gay cruising spots. We cut back reassuringly to the pair of them in bed. But what are they doing? Nothing more terrible than watching *An Affair To Remember* on late-night TV and reeling out the closing lines from memory along with Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant.

⁵ See David Dubow, 'Making Love', *Gay News*, May 13 1982, no 240.

This then is 'the perfect marriage' as far as Twentieth Century Fox is concerned. Enter Bart, muscular novelist and Zack's patient. Soon the two repair to Bart's pine-panelled apartment, where Zack explains that he is 'just curious' and Bart replies that 'life's too short to play games'. They end up in bed together for the least explicit love scene in the history of cinema, with manly shoulders bravely bared in a shuttered light which rouses memories from *An American Gigolo*.

Making Love is unique in my experience as the only representation of a gay relationship in commercial cinema which doesn't boast so much as a single buttock. It is a significant absence. But soon Zack commits a horribly indecent act—he tells Bart that he is in love with him. Exit Zack. Or rather, exit Bart, since having shown Zack the door he is no longer functional within the narrative, and is last seen strolling off into the extra-diegetic limbo of gay bars, promiscuity, and friendship. The climax of the film is Zack's tortured 'Coming Out' to Claire. 'What about *passion*?' she yells. 'What about *support*?' he counters. They split, he to a motel, she to melodrama. But everything turns out for the best, since this is in fact a Terminal Disease movie with a 'miracle cure' ending, unlike director Arthur Hiller's earlier *Love Story*. In this case it is discovered that if two of the sufferers are persuaded they are in love with one another, and carefully removed to an *extremely* expensive New York apartment, then not only will everyone get an *even* better job than before, but the world will go on very much as if nothing has happened. But something has happened, and to understand what we need to go back to Bart.

Making Love is clearly not about making love. That is to say, it carefully avoids the whole messy business of sex. Love is about 'feelings'. As Roberta Flack croons in the film's title song, 'there's more to love than making love'. Nor, like *Cruising*, is it actually a film about homosexuality. Just as *Cruising* uses the leather scene to crank out its version of 'good' versus 'bad' masculinity, so *Making Love* explores the meaning of marriage in today's middle-class America. And it is Bart who plays the crucial role in this respect. Both he and Zack are seen to be running away—Zack from accepting his homosexuality, Bart from what we are meant to see as a 'mature', 'stable' relationship. And at this point the problems start mounting up. For Bart's rejection of Zack is clearly constructed as a symptom of personal inadequacy. Throughout the film people keep asking one another if they are 'happy'. Happiness is the real premium, for this is a society of complete hedonism. Bart fails as a complete hedonist, or to put this another way, Bart's concept of happiness (independence, non-monogamous relationships, living alone, belonging to a gay community) is utterly incompatible with the picture of pleasure which almost everyone else in the film is obediently consuming. Bart's lifestyle could scarcely be more different in its social aspects to that of the Elliots. They are both *astonishingly* isolated, their one friend being an eccentric elderly Englishwoman. But all they can talk about is poetry. Is this the price of having 'Culture'? If so it problematises the whole picture of their relationship as 'the perfect marriage'. Claire actually has



'After eight happy years of marriage . . .': the model couple in *Making Love*.

nobody to turn to in the world but Zack. Her politics, such as they are, apply exclusively to her work. Facing objections to her plan to launch a major series of American plays on TV she insists that the public 'want junk because we've taught them to want junk'. This may be snobbish nonsense, but it is there to signify a 'social concern' on her part which curiously has no application whatsoever in her own life. The only support the script can offer her is a Good Man, and a little baby Rupert. Zack is similarly rescued from the 'misery' of being gay by yet another Good Man. The moral line of *Making Love* thus runs as follows. Gay men are 'nice' people who like old movies, and poetry, and fine wines, and so on. But if you're a woman, watch out, because that's not enough. It will not give you a baby. If you are a gay man however, you must do your best to make up for your failings by finding another man and becoming a couple. This is the problematic of *Making Love*, how to raise the modern childless 'couple' to the former status of the 'family'. And the magic salve, of course, is romantic love. The title song again makes this point explicitly, in its simplistic claim that 'we're all the better for each other'.

But in *Making Love* the process of Coming Out is presented strictly as a private domestic issue, more like a confession that one prefers Monte-

verdi to Mozart than an affirmation of social identity with far-reaching practical consequences. As far as the film is concerned the only problem is being 'oneself'. If one can only manage that, everything else will be alright. Thus, having been offered a choice between her career and motherhood, Claire is seen to have made the 'right' decision, just as Zack made the 'right' decision to 'face up to' his homosexuality. But Zack is in any case only coming out to Claire in order to go back into a new monogamous relationship with another man, as if women and men were somehow entirely equal. The magical illusion of sexual equivalence is effected through Love. Love is the only reason for Bart's existence in the film: rejecting it, he instantly ceases to be.

The only really provocative character in the entire film is a man Claire visits when she is trying to trace Zack's whereabouts after their marriage has broken down. Finding a match-book in one of Zack's jackets, she meets the man whose phone number is written on it, thinking him to be her husband's lover. He recognises Zack from a photograph, but not his name. The man explains very frankly that Zack must have been a one-night stand, and that since he gave him his phone number he must have been good in bed. This scene is viewed very much from Claire's point of view, that of the 'innocent abroad', a position which enables the film to contrast this anonymous cruiser and his very non-ideal home unfavourably to the world of Love and coupledness. But what he actually says refutes the narrative function which he is supposed to embody, for he is the only character in the entire film who actually talks about sex. There is even a jar of vaseline discreetly placed on the table next to his fold-away bed. He alone speaks for an order of gay pleasure against the rest of the film's opposition to such values.

Making Love posits a highly coercive ideology of how we *all* ought to live, assuming a transcendent identity of interests in the name of Love over and above the material divisions of class, sexuality, and gender. Thus, in effect, Zack loses a wife in order to become a wife. But in the world as set up in *Making Love* being a wife is a position of complete equality with one's husband. This is only made possible by constructing the central 'model' marriage as a relationship of almost inconceivable banality. Hence the weakness of the film as a whole, given its refusal to acknowledge the actual social, economic and sexual inequalities between women and men, inside the ideological fortress of marriage, or outside. In this respect it also resembles *Looking For Mr Goodbar* in so far as both films establish a completely spurious notion of sexual equality, only to knock it firmly on the head as soon as that equality comes anywhere near challenging the fixed order of monogamy and masculine ascendancy. In the case of *Making Love* homosexuality seems to have been chosen as the single most terrible thing that could confront any marriage. The 'dignity' and 'moral courage' with which the characters sweep the whole business under the carpet is what makes it ultimately so reactionary and offensive. Like John Schlesinger's *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, which it echoes very closely in both formal and narrative terms, *Making Love* presents homosexuality *exclusively* as a moral dilemma. This is not to say

that issues of morality should not be brought into play, but to note how easy it is to displace the public issues of sexual categorisation away into questions of individual and internal conflicts.

When Claire marries again and has a child, we see the romance barometer rising in Zack's partnership to 'compensate' for its childlessness. Claire has baby Rupert, while Zack and his two-year lover have antiques. *Making Love* uses gay men as an exemplary stick with which to drive heterosexuals back into the marriage market and joint mortgage industry. It exhorts gays to lock themselves away discreetly in what Jacques Donzelot has described as a 'functional simulacrum' of traditional marriage⁶. Compared with this *Sunday Bloody Sunday* was positively revolutionary in its implication that, as Glenda Jackson's character put it, 'there are times when nothing *has* to be better than anything', meaning that she is better off on her own than in an unequal relationship. After a line like that we certainly wouldn't have heard any more from her in *Making Love*.

One of the most unpleasant features of the film is its mobilisation of the notion of sterility, the implication that homosexuality can only be tolerated in the likeness of the 'warmth' of marriage, and that ultimately a childless woman is a failure. This is the underlying text of *Making Love*, its implicit critique of everything that the Women's and Gay Movements have fought for in the last two decades. Yet the film depends for its very existence on the collective struggles of countless individuals and groups who have worked over the years to bring homosexuality out of the 'celluloid closet' as Vito Russo recently described it⁷. This is the real irony of *Making Love*. It is a film which not only denies the actual inferior status of women and gays, but compounds that denial by using an image of homosexuality in order to recruit us all back into the 'decent' ways of monogamy and traditional gender roles.

CONCLUSION

The concept of 'sexuality', which organises us all into distinct if highly-generalised categories, according to our sexual pleasures, is only a little older than the cinema. Film emerged in a period of immense moral panic concerning the apparent discovery of a new and intrinsically degenerate species of being in our midst – the homosexual – a previously undetected and therefore all the more insidious threat to 'morality' and 'public order'. It was also intensively developed as a competitive capitalist industry around the ideology of 'family entertainment', and the commercial need for 'mass' audiences. From its origins, as Michael Chanan has pointed out⁸, film was also understood by the State and moral puritans as an instrument for instruction, and a potentially dangerous 'corrupting' influence. For this reason it has always been subject to intense moral scrutiny, especially from those who equate morality with sex. A profound anxiety about homosexuality is thus deeply inscribed within the entire history of motion pictures, an anxiety which compounds a fear

⁶ Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*, London, Hutchinson, 1979, p 227.

⁷ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, New York, Harper & Row, 1981.

⁸ Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

⁹ Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family*, London, Pluto, 1978.

¹⁰ Rosalind Coward, 'What Is Pornography?', *Spare Rib*, June 1982, no 119, pp 52-54.

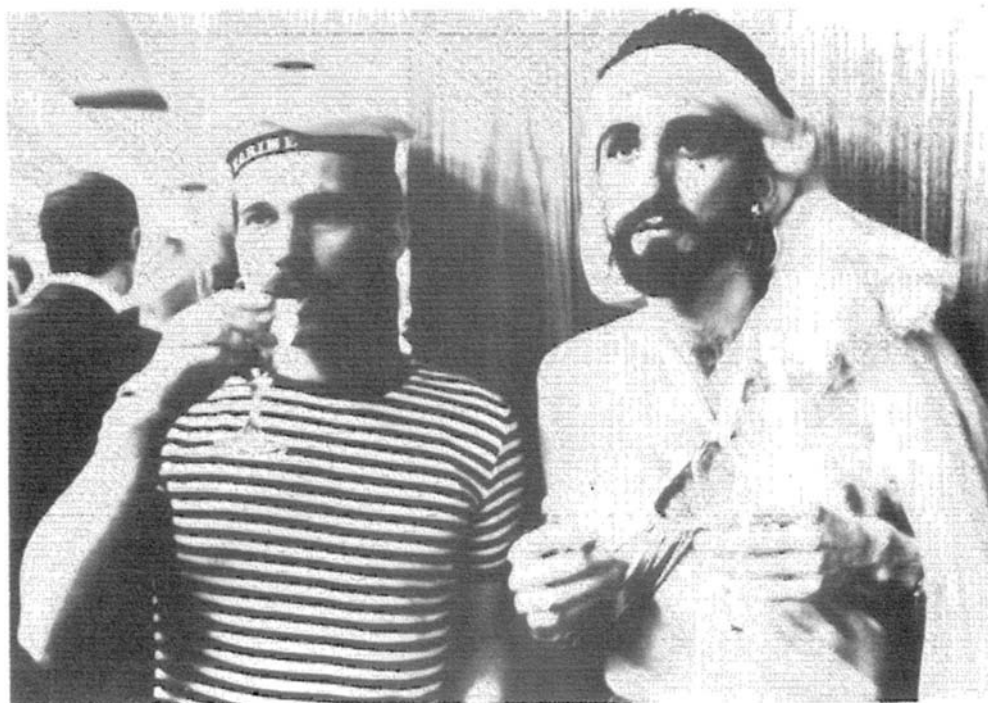
of moral 'contagion' with the loss of profits. Before the appearance of an articulate and self-affirming community of lesbians and gay men there was never any question of homosexuality being presented in any very positive light, let alone as a valid alternative to heterosexuality. Nor, as is apparent from *Cruising* and *Making Love*, is it today. The role of the homosexual in film history has tended to be exclusively defined by the requirements of the dominant values of film culture. While it is important to avoid functionalist explanations of the emergence of the modern evaluation and categorisation of sexual behaviour and desire, as if these were somehow planned in advance in the interests of capitalism, it is clear that the representation of sex in film has indeed tended to express particular sectional interests. As Mark Poster and others have observed, the categorisation of 'sexuality' emerged at the same time as the establishment of the modern family householding unit.⁹

While the films which I have considered differ radically in their strategies of representing and evaluating male homosexuality, both may be seen to be responsive to recent changes in the ongoing cultural normalisation of heterosexual family life as the basic unit for all 'natural' social life. In *Cruising* homosexuality is constructed as pure sex, yet to do so it pushes its subject matter to new levels of sexual explicitness in order to guarantee its regulatory shock-power. This is only to note the relation between images of homosexuality and the ever-changing definitions of what is or is not 'decent' at a given period.¹⁰ In *Making Love* sex is equally important, but by virtue of its systematic exclusion from the central thrust of the film. Both films however take it for granted that the mere fact of homosexuality needs explaining in some way, and certainly don't fail to provide answers. What is fascinating is that both films come to such exactly identical conclusions.

Thus the murderer in *Cruising* is ponderously (and ludicrously) 'explained' in relation to his hostile, rejecting father. Similarly both Zack and Bart in *Making Love* are seen to have cold, unloving, career-oriented Dads. And so also has poor childless Claire. This particular aetiology also extends to Teresa in *Looking For Mr Goodbar*, whose 'promiscuity', and rejection of motherhood, is also related to one of those rare Hollywood diseases which leaves its victims totally crippled in childhood, but allows them to emerge miraculously healed for the purposes of the narrative. If the indictment of her one-night-standing is repulsive and grossly hypocritical in relation to the relatively sympathetic treatment of the equally cruisy male characters in *Looking For Mr Goodbar*, we can also gauge the degree of moralism at work in *Cruising* and *Making Love*, where the issue of non-monogamous sex has nothing to do with marriage since the people involved are all men. This is precisely the point. These films cannot propose the notion that different groups of people enjoy different kinds of sexual pleasure according to different, and frequently incompatible sets of moral criteria. The very concept of 'promiscuity' is clearly irrelevant to gay men, existing as it does solely and purposively in relation to the ideals of marital monogamy.

An independently produced film like Frank Ripploh's autobiographical *Taxi Zum Klo* may be more sensitive to the actual complexities and organisation of homosexual desire, but the relative ease with which the central character adopts the signifiers of many different gay cultural groups makes him no more 'representative' of gays than the leather-men of *Cruising* or the Ivy League types who populate the gay scene in *Making Love*. At least *Taxi* presents gay sex as a positive pleasure, even if to do so Ripploh ends up by looking rather like a one-man embodiment of the kind of all-purpose gay-bar which I have discussed earlier. The film is also unable or unwilling to examine the basic conflicts in its central relationship between Ripploh and his boyfriend, Bernd, who is represented as submissive and voyeuristic, with connotations of 'wifeliness' which are frankly snobbish and implicitly misogynistic.

Taxi Zum Klo has a grainy low-budget look about it, which lends it a certain quality of documentary 'authenticity' in relation to the chiaroscuro effects of *Cruising*, and the antiseptic cleanliness of *Making Love*. But in its exhortations to 'be oneself' it is finally no more radical than either of them. It ends just where it should have begun, with the political and practical consequences of the main character's dismissal as a teacher. In *Taxi* this is seen as more or less inevitable, and in fact it is the film itself which is the result. Ripploh never faces up to the consequences of his Liberationist lifestyle politics. His cross-dressing character certainly controls and transforms the signs of his masculinity. But masculinity is



Bernd and Frank (right) at the ball in *Taxi Zum Klo*: cross-dressing without consequences?

¹¹ See Simon Watney, 'On Gay Liberation', *Politics and Power*, 1981, no 4.

never really problematised, since it is never related to its deep determining sources (particularly economic dependence). The sight of a bearded man dressed up in full regalia as Queen Victoria on this year's Gay Pride March in London may well be a stunning demonstration of the cultural and social origins, and mutability, of gender, but it does not begin to confront the *fixity* of gendering as experienced by most women and men, gay or otherwise.¹¹

There is no such thing as 'gay film', apart from certain types of pornography which may be produced, distributed and consumed exclusively by gay-identifying men. This, however, would be an extremely reductive and unhelpful definition. The cultural forms of male homosexuality are too contradictory to support any single genre as such, and gay experience, as I have suggested, is always structured from elements in the dominant heterosexual culture which precede the requirements and perceptions of gay experience. The fact of homosexuality does not guarantee *anything* beyond the given alignments of sexuality, gender and class within the social formation. What *can* be expected, and must be demanded, is an end to films like *Cruising*, which wilfully position homosexuality within a dense and mystifying field of associations with terror, violence, self-hatred and psychological disorder, or the more subtle surrender to monogamy and 'family life' advocated in *Making Love*.

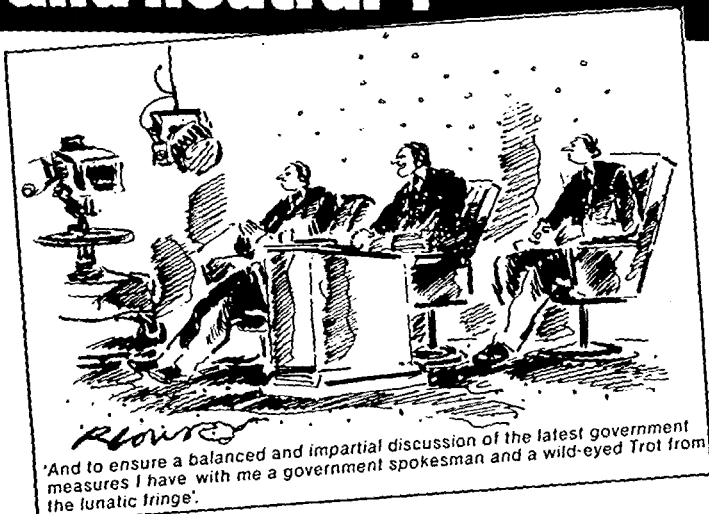
In many ways the recent Australian film, *Gallipoli* goes further in showing sexuality as a system of regulative constraints, with its careful depiction of conflicting values and expectations about masculinity and male behaviour. Likewise the underrated *La Cage Aux Folles, Deux*, contains at least one sequence of great relevance. Albin, the middle-aged drag-queen lover of the 'butch' Renato, runs away in drag to Italy for refuge from a gang of criminals. Hiding with Renato's family, Albin is taken for a woman, and treated as such. S/he is made to work all day in the fields with the other women of the household, and then to cook and attend on the menfolk all evening. Although the sequence is also a delicious send-up of the Italian way of life from a specifically French point of view, it becomes clear to Albin for the first time in his life that femininity is not merely a function of frocks. An altogether different film which makes a similar point is *Prince Of The City*, which is concerned with the ways in which a group of Italian-Americans struggle, as men, against the same economic and class system, whether they are in the police or the mafia. This extraordinary film problematises masculinity in such a way that choices about work, family life, child-rearing, and so on are related to one another in a network of dependencies and loyalties which are social, moral, economic and sexual. Such films prefigure, in their very different ways, the kinds of concerns to which a sexual political analysis of film should be addressing itself.

The questions we ought to ask of cinema concern the criteria which operate within it to determine which social phenomena are felt to be 'intrinsically' in need of explanation, and which are not, and how these criteria are derived from complex assumptions about audiences and

profitability, as well as the ambient ideological climate of gendering and sexuality as such. As Michel Foucault has said in a recent interview, 'What is interesting is not so much a social history of sexual compartments, a psychological history of attitudes to sexuality, but a history of the problematisation of these compartments.'¹² The political question of gays in film remains however dependent upon our recognition that sexual subjectivities are not merely abstract 'categories', at the analytic level of discourse, but the expression of the desires and needs of real people in the material world.

¹² Michel Foucault, 'Histoire et Homosexualité', *Masques: Revue des Homosexualités*, Spring 1982, no 13, p 22 (author's translation).

The media: 'Balanced, unbiased, impartial and neutral'?



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MORE THAN METHODOLOGY

GRISELDA POLLOCK REVIEWS A NEW STUDY OF FEMINISM AND FILM THEORY

I suspect that my experience is not untypical of those who teach feminism and film studies. The sheer complexity of some of the texts, the arcane and rapid evolution of the debate within feminism and other pertinent discourses, let alone the diligence required in tracing this through scattered magazines and books or getting to see the right films – all this makes it difficult and time-consuming to guide initiates through the material, to make it available for their use and extension. Thus I welcome the publication of this excellent and useful book.

Women's Pictures provides an admirable introduction to the major components of structuralist, semiotic and psychoanalytic arguments around film. In Part Two, Annette Kuhn clearly explains and illustrates both the institutional and textual analyses of 'The Pleasure Machine', or Dominant Cinema. This section (and an excellent glossary) also familiarise the reader with the key concepts and terms subsequently deployed to specify feminist interventions in theory and film production – for example, address, suture, the look, the subject, spectator-text relations and so forth. Written fluently, it lays out the historical development of these terms of analysis. The living practice of theoretical developments is easily lost in such introductions and surveys. Theory can be explicated by the unwary so that it is received like a monolith of abstracted thought covered in alien script. In Annette Kuhn's exegesis both the

origins and the motivations (necessities) for the elaboration of new forms of analyses, new ways of understanding the cinematic apparatus, are incorporated. Thus the first two parts of the book offer useful introductory material for work in a wide range of groups.

The book also participates in a current phenomenon in feminism. The need to collate the endeavours of a decade and make them known to the next, is now clearly felt. That quality of 'knowing' about feminist debates by virtue of friendships or work involvement has to be expanded into a more public statement and assessment of the project – an act of securing what we have been doing for history, and for other feminists.

Part Three of *Women's Pictures* addresses feminist film theory in particular to ask 'What is it that feminism does to film theory that turns it into something special, something different from the general run of film criticism that makes no claim to be "feminist"?'¹ In order to answer that, Annette Kuhn raises a further question: Is feminism to be understood as a methodology or a perspective? Is it just another set of tools, another brand of theory, or is it a method-

¹ Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, p. 69. Further page references to this book will be included in the text in parenthesis.

transcending way of actually posing the questions, probing into areas other theories overlook, changing those other theories themselves? Kuhn argues for the latter.

Feminist theory involves taking up a distinct stance or position in relation to its object, therefore, and thus in this sense cannot be regarded as politically neutral. To do feminist theory is, consciously or otherwise, to engage in an intervention within theory or culture. (p 70)

Some years ago such a statement would have been made with more aggression or not at all. At the present moment of pressing conservatism and cultural Thatcherism it needs to be asserted adamantly. The development of a body of feminist film theory and practices, accommodated into film courses and publications, runs the risk that currently faces Women's Studies in general – merely becoming another academic subject.² Vital as it is that feminism has constructed a new body of knowledge and challenged existing frameworks of analysis, the historical and political imperatives have to be highly visible if the project is not to be neutralised or deracinated.³

As perspective rather than methodology, however, feminism is not homogeneous. And here Kuhn judiciously negotiates her position as author and partisan. A book on feminism and cinema must render a fair account of its many tendencies, but as a feminist shaped by the debates of the decade, Kuhn also attempts a distinct intervention into these questions. Happily, she manages to make the major lines of approach into building blocks in the construction of her own case. Iterated in several instances in the book, the main theoretical and practical divides occur around the status of the image. The author discerns two main threads: the sociologically based methods which 'locate images, roles and representations of women in cinema as phenomena reflecting, or perhaps determined by, the position of women in the "real" world'; and that which has tended 'to premise itself on a notion of representation as

mediated, as a social and ideological construct, an autonomous or relatively autonomous process of meaning production which does not necessarily relate immediately to or reflect unproblematically a "real" social world. Here therefore the main focus of interest has been the ways in which woman has been constituted as a set of meanings through the processes of cinematic signification.' (p 71).

Kuhn's own preference for this latter approach is admitted with the necessary acknowledgement of its dangers – overemphasis on mere textual analysis to the detriment of a fuller range of institutional and historical facets of production and consumption. Nonetheless she gives a fair account of the feminisms of sociologically based readings and also discusses films made in ways which correspond to such premises. It is one of the salient features of feminism and cinema that theory and practice can be so fruitfully accommodated in one book, despite the fact that neither one nor the other are in any easy way deduced from or directly influenced by the other. The conjunction emphasises the claim that feminism presents the possibilities of a genuine intervention in culture.

Kuhn's approach to pornography represents one attempt to overcome the limitations of textual analysis alluded to earlier. Semiotic readings of films tend to bracket off equally crucial questions of social, institutional and historical production contexts. But there are methodological problems in combining – or trying to combine – epistemologically distinct approaches such as empirical studies of the institution of the cinema with structural analyses of texts. In her case study on pornography, the author addresses the very problems which a survey leaves unresolved, that is, what is the status of different methodologies? Are they irreconcilable? Or does the student simply swap hats, doing semiotic psychoanalytical interpretations of a film one week and sociology of the cinema as industry the next? This dilemma is particularly acute for feminist studies since diversity in perspective can easily become confused with methodological eclecticism (especially around the important political question of which Marxism, if any at all, one might co-opt or be co-opted by in the use of various methods). The neat strands of argument presented in this study are in danger of

² Mary Evans, 'In Praise of Theory: the Case for Women's Studies', *Feminist Review* 10, Spring 1982, pp 61-74.

³ Kuhn herself argues this, *op cit*, pp 80-81.

becoming no more than different brands on the shelf at the radical academic's supermarket. To overcome this, and, at the same time, give substance to the claim that feminism does something to film theories, Kuhn undertakes to map out what might constitute a 'semiotically-informed conjunctural analysis of the cinema from a feminist perspective' (p 109).

The choice of pornography for such a case study is explained as 'its currency and urgency in feminist politics' (p 110). By way of definition Annette Kuhn opens with the statement that all pornography is representation and all representation is to be understood not as duplication of the real world, but always as variously coded. On this basis we need to identify the textual characteristics of pornographic representations. The 1979 *Home Office Report of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship* (the Williams Report) specifies two related features: content, explicit representations of sexual materials (historically variable) and function, sexual arousal. The latter implies modes of address, rhetoric, codes, spectator-text relations, address to a sexed and sexual subject. A feminist analysis of pornography's content would further specify its material as mostly or often representations of women, displayed and accessorised in ways which are addressed to a male spectator. Women's bodies are framed, lit, posed and contextualised so as to be offered to a *masculine* gaze.⁴ The body of woman is produced as spectacle, as an object of masculine looking. Furthermore woman as object functions in a double sense *within* the representation and *as* a representation/ commodity, exchanged, thus, not only psychically but economically in the actual commercial transactions of the trade.

Pornographic representations of sexual activity raise somewhat different questions – not just of degree as the soft-core/hard-core labels suggest. And Kuhn argues that whereas the law is often more concerned to regulate so called hard-core

material because it treats pornography in general as pathological and exceptional, feminists direct much of their attention to soft-core images which overlap textually with a huge range of common and normative representations – the insults of everyday sexism. 'This suggests that a feminist approach to pornography immediately challenges other definitions of, and discourses around, pornography current in society' (p 115).

Having laid that ground, the author outlines what she calls the 'pornographic apparatus' – a term which attempts to treat it as more than text, as indeed a social structure, 'the textual and institutional product of historically specific interactions of its economic, ideological and other conditions of existence' (p 116). These include economic conditions (sectors of the economy and technology) which function within capitalism. Legal conditions indicate the limits of discourse and constraint; Kuhn observes that the law merely holds the ring for competing social definitions. But she suggests that feminism in fact proposes a definition of pornography that actually falls outside of, or is significantly more extensive than, those already competing within the sphere of liberal legislation.

To explain this 'excess' Kuhn initiates a discussion of the level she terms patriarchal relations as the third component of the pornographic apparatus. 'Patriarchal' is used instead of 'ideological' not only to distinguish such relations from the ideological components of economic and legal conditions, but also to emphasise the need for analysis of the precise characteristics of these social relations, seen more as a social formation than a set of beliefs. Patriarchal social relations can be discerned in the state of power relations between men and women, the position of women in class and racial divisions, current sexual mores. In addition to the level of the social they must also be hunted at the level of psychic relations and forms of subjectivity. The implications of this proposed model are decidedly not spatial, relegating patriarchal relations to the 'superstructural' level of ideologies. Kuhn's project is in fact to specify patriarchal relations precisely in order to escape crude determinist models and also to negotiate the double but theoretically distinct objectification of woman in pornography as commodity (within capitalist relations of production) and spectacle (within patriarchal

⁴ Kuhn uses the gender term 'male', but the positional term 'masculine' avoids biologism. See also, Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"' Inspired by "Duel in the Sun", *Framework* 15/16/17, 1981, pp 12-65; and Claire Pajaczkowska, 'The Heterosexual Presumption', *Screen* vol 22 no 1, pp 79-94.

relations). Without a clear distinction, one is collapsed into the other and feminist interventions are lost again to those male thinkers who preserve an otherwise discarded economism especially for dealing with feminist threats to patriarchal masculinity.

Kuhn concludes this line of argument with a discussion on cinema and pornography wherein the institutional conditions of reception – specifically film censorship – are explored. The example used, drawn from mainstream commercial cinema, is a film about sexual violence against women. *Dressed to Kill* passed the censors with a few shots excised – none of which had anything to do with the film's overall misogyny. Kuhn asserts that since censorship deals only with specific moments of a film and not its modes of address, spectator-text relations and so forth,

no form of censorship... can meet a critique of Dressed to Kill which points to the general attitude towards women and female sexuality structuring the film's narrative and cinematic codes. How can patriarchal ideology be censored? The case of Dressed to Kill offers a powerful illustration of how the terms of a feminist discourse on forms of 'feminine visibility' can exceed those of dominant legal or quasi-legal discourses, however liberal, on obscenity and pornography. (p 128)

The point is tellingly made and usefully developed. But does it not point to a larger claim which would not leave censorship merely a legal discourse but chart the patriarchal relations of its activities? Censorship operates only to regulate the extreme limits of a set of patriarchal relations fundamentally endorsed by the policing of its margins. Nor are all the textual characteristics of pornographic film unique: they bleed into other cinematic representations and institutions, suggesting that sexual representations (representations to and for the construction of sexual positions) are central to the operations of the cinema. Given the specific characteristics of the apparatus, feminist analysis has itself to be recognised neither as excess, nor simply as another critical theory within film analysis, but as its logical and necessary dominant.

This is not a direction that *Women's Pictures* goes on to explore. The latter sections are devoted to discussion of feminist film practices, initiated in Part One with a string of questions

beginning 'What is a feminist film?' Is it a film made by a woman, a film made with a feminist intention? In replying, Kuhn traverses debates on authorship, gender, intentionality, audience and 'feminine' language⁵, concluding,

if it is accepted that meaning does not reside purely in the text itself, that it is not something locked within the text waiting for a reader in order to be liberated, but is itself to some degree an independent product or outcome of reading, then it becomes impossible to consider feminism in terms of fixed textual attributes, whether they be of 'form' or of 'content', let alone in terms of whether or not producers intended to put them there. (p 16)

The result is an escape from object-centred approaches to cultural production and an insistence upon the activity, the social practices and the subjects for whom the texts as meaningful tokens circulate. Instead of a feminist practice posed only as oppositional or alternative, this approach allows the 'woman question' its centrality. Moreover, we replace the limiting question, 'What is a feminist text?' with the new, broader one, 'What is a feminist intervention in culture?'

However, for many film-makers and theorists, feminism involves a commitment or loyalty which encourages clear statements about issues of representations from an avowed position. This recalls the debates around the artist's political commitment, or 'tendency', in Revolutionary Russia. Kuhn demonstrates how 'tendentiousness' leads back to the traps of intentionality and the closed text:

It is clear that openness as a defining characteristic of the feminine is something very different from the closure, fixation or limitation of meaning implied by the tendentious text. In this difference two distinct forms of cultural practice may in fact be at stake. And indeed it does actually underlie a series

⁵ 'Irigaray sets up a relationship of analogy between gender and language, so that Western discourse is seen as possessing the "masculine" attributes of visibility, goal-orientation, and so on. A feminine language, or a feminine relation to language, would on the other hand challenge and subvert this form of discourse by posing plurality over against unity, multitudes of meanings as against single, fixed meanings, diffuseness as against instrumentality.' Kuhn, op cit, p 11.

of strategic dissensions and contradictions within contemporary feminist cultural politics. Such dissensions may be summed up briefly by distinguishing between two extremes of cultural practice, one which tends to take processes of signification for granted and one which argues that the meaning production process is itself a site of struggle. (p 17)

It is these two 'extremes', or clusters of film practices, which Kuhn elaborates in the final section of her book. The chapter 'Real Women' surveys films working in the documentary mode (documentary used in its most general and historically unspecific sense). A critique is gently advanced by stating the assumptions which sustain the direct appeal to the documented, non-fictional truth of letting the films' subjects speak direct to the audience via the apparently neutral vehicle of film representations. Then, in 'Textual Politics' the author goes on to examine countercinema, films which do not merely opt for one mode (documentary, for instance) against others, but set out 'to challenge and subvert the operations of dominant cinema' (p 157). From here two positions develop. One is based on the notion that 'all forms of illusionism are ideologically implicated' and the other focuses on the 'forms of pleasure generated in the relations of specularly set up by dominant cinema, classic Hollywood narrative in particular' (p 158). From the first derives the case for a 'deconstructive' cinema using explicitly anti-realist and anti-illusionist textual strategies. The second works on the question of gendered subjectivity and the viewing process. Going beyond deconstruction, it attempts to invoke a specifically feminine film language.

Feminist deconstructive cinema is itself conscious of gender issues and consequently different from other merely formalist strategies. It aims for both oppositional modes and oppositional contents. And while it may distance and unfix the spectator by offering several points of view in different film modes, like the tendentious text it ultimately seeks closure. *Whose Choice?* (London Women's Film Group 1976) may offer different voices and

experiences on abortion and mix its modes (documentary, narrative, etc.) but its 'highly circumscribed and predefined' subject matter permits the spectator to negotiate a position only in relation to a specific set of issues.

The cinema of 'feminine writing' (the author's examples include *Jeanne Dielman, Thriller, Lives of the Performers*) is also deconstructive, challenging dominant forms of signification, but it further seeks to construct new forms, new pleasures. Its operations are therefore addressed to spectator-text relations, and thence to psychic structures of subjectivity. There is an important link to be made here with the author's arguments about pornography: like the latter, this cinema is not just content but function, constructing an address to a sexed/gendered spectator. Far from being 'just' a cinema for women, it is an attempt to break up the ideological unity signified by the term 'man' which masks the social privilege of the masculine and negates the heterogeneity that is labelled feminine. What patriarchy calls 'the feminine' occupies a fundamentally radical and subversive place from which to erode the very fixity of the subjectivity in which film and other representations constantly strive to constitute us.⁶ The cinema of feminine writing offers far more than 'an openness of address in combination with matters of expression in relation to which spectators may place themselves as women and/or feminists' (p 177). Indeed the limit of its address here to gender or politics restricts this text from articulating the full potential of the feminine. If Annette Kuhn's valuable new study has a fault, it is that her claims for feminist cinema are too gently put. In the present climate a mere record of the work of the 1970s, however necessary, is insufficient. The political imperative is if possible even more urgent. The books we write cannot underestimate the crisis of feminism's continuing marginality nor its utterly revolutionary purpose.

⁶ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock make a similar case in relation to the visual arts in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

REFLECTIONS ON EROS

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PAM COOK REVIEWS 'AN EPIC POEM'

An Epic Poem is a short, independently-made film produced with the help of Arts Association money, voluntary labour and love. It's unusual in that it manages to raise pressing questions for feminism while being witty, visually pleasurable, formally innovative and politically affirmative: qualities which our defensive politics all-too-often lead us to distrust. Pleasure, in all its painful contradictions, is one of the big questions feminism faces in the '80s.

The film opens with archive footage of preparations for World War I. The phallic shadow of a Zeppelin falls across the land, the male civilian population trains to take up arms, she kisses him goodbye forever and returns to work in the armaments factories. The machinery of war is set in motion. The anachronistic sound of a NASA countdown brings these images from the past chillingly close to the present, reminding us of our own world shadowed by war. Feminist politics has yet to sort itself out in relation to war, or rather the many different kinds of war we are faced with today. How does feminism relate, for instance, to militarism, to women's careers in the army, to nationalistic wars of liberation, to pacifism and the Peace Movement? These are urgent questions in the context of Ireland, the nationalistic war-cries thrown up by the South Atlantic crisis, and the imminent presence of Cruise missile bases, but they also have a more long-term relevance to

issues of feminism and violence. Traditionally, male society has placed the ideal of femininity outside war, in the realm of love, the peaceful hearth and home which finally justifies all the political atrocities carried out in the name of war. The warlike, Amazonian woman has a function in this scenario: she represents a threat to male control, and in overcoming her, man is all the more manly, hence the erotic charge of the image; Penthesilea and her Amazons forcibly subdued by the virile Theseus, power returned to its rightful place. But not forever, as myth and history demonstrate...

An Epic Poem approaches the traditional division between war and love, masculine and feminine by way of myth: the story of the adulterous affair between Ares and Aphrodite in Homer's *Odyssey*. The mythological past is set against feminist history: the struggles of the militant suffragettes, and present-day campaigns by the Women's Movement for contraception and abortion, in order to raise questions about the relationship between myth, its unconscious processes, and the real social and political gains made by organised feminist politics. The film looks back, not in order to find a lost women's history truer than prevailing male versions, but to provoke contradictions which allow us to question the past and its inevitability. It finds the past again in the present, in a new set of problems and contradictions.

The 'machinery of war' montage includes stills showing women's work in the armaments factories. A neutral voice proclaims: 'The war has left Europe with at least ten million women to live without men.' The frantic activity comes suddenly to a halt as an explosion drives the workers from the factory, and our heroine, a suffragette working to prepare bombs, stops to think. In a radical shift of point-of-view which shows us her feet running from her eye-view, the neutrality of the documentary sequence is shattered, and the feminist viewpoint takes over the film. The modern woman, typing the script, sees herself in the suffragette heroine of her film, and in the myth of Ares and Aphrodite which it appropriates.

In the *Odyssey* Homer tells us how Aphrodite, goddess of love, has been married off by her father Zeus to the crippled king Hephaestus in exchange for a large dowry. She is seduced by expensive gifts into an affair with Ares, the god of War, which is revealed to Hephaestus by Helios, the sun, who spies on the lovers. Hephaestus takes revenge by imprisoning Ares and Aphrodite in a web of chains, demanding that Zeus repay the entire dowry. He is finally persuaded to release Ares into the guardianship of Poseidon, so that Aphrodite is released also, and returns to her all-female sanctuary, Paphos, and her Three Graces.

A striking metaphor indeed for patriarchal power relations. Aphrodite is created in the image of man's desire for himself. Her beauty, her narcissistic sexuality, arouse all men, making them weak when they should be strong. She is the reason for, the fault of, man's forbidden desires, causing him to transgress his own social codes, here defined in terms of heterosexual monogamy. Heterosexuality is rooted in a basic contradiction: the suppression of male homosexual desire and displacement of anxiety onto the woman's body. Since the guilt is hers, man can be redeemed. Ares, of course, is also beautiful: he has his passive, feminine side, brought out by his fascination with Aphrodite. He is weakened, feminised by their affair, distracted from his duties: a victim of the love he initiated. For all the power wielded by men in the story (their control of kinship relations, of wealth, of machinery, of 'the look') it is the feminine, constantly threatening to slip out of control, that challenges the male order at its very

roots. The fusion/confusion of love and war, femininity and masculinity, is the problem that the myth tries to resolve, finally returning Ares to his rightful place with the male gods, and Aphrodite to her all-female sanctuary.

What, then, is the relationship of the myth to history, and to social reality? Feminist films about women's history – *Babies and Banners* or *Rosie the Riveter*, for instance – concentrate on uncovering a past excluded from conventional histories. These films are intended to redress the balance in favour of women, and in them women are shown speaking for themselves, recounting a lost women's history which provides a truer version than the distortions of conventional accounts. More recently, feminist films have tried to present history differently, not as a lost content, or linear progression of events, but as a network of different representations, or discourses: shifting points-of-view which overlap with and contradict one another. *Song of the Shirt* and *Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons* are examples of this discursive cinema, and so is *An Epic Poem*, albeit in a more amusing vein. It traces the mythological opposition between love and war through a number of historical moments, interrupting at key points to ask whether, and how, things might have happened differently. What, for example, if Aphrodite had refused to marry? Myth cannot be collapsed into history, but neither is it a false story which can be simply replaced by the 'truth'. Myth continues to circumscribe our existence because it is deeply embedded in our thought processes and in our representations – the film juxtaposes Freud, Juliet Mitchell on psychoanalysis and feminism, a pamphlet on *Women and the Census* and Homer's *Odyssey* to point up the contradictory conjunction of myth and history, which, it argues, is neither natural or inevitable. The strategy of overlapping different kinds and orders of representation produces gaps in the seamless progress of the narratives of myth and history which allow us to question their authority.

The Ares and Aphrodite myth, when brought together with the struggles of the militant suffragettes, and with the modern woman's story, whose 'sexual liberation' imprisons her in the same traps, starts to look different. The suffragettes, while campaigning around the issue of the vote, were also engaged in feminist

struggles on many other levels. They fought against women's confinement within the private sphere of the Victorian patriarchal family.

Although that family hardly exists any longer, the contemporary Women's Movement still finds itself campaigning around issues such as abortion law and contraception: clearly women do not yet control their bodies, or perhaps more importantly, their minds. But feminist politics takes a different route than the myth: it brings war back into the bedroom, transforming it into a battleground. Aphrodite now resists.

If history is a question of representation, it is also more often than not a process of misrecognition. Sappho's poem to Aphrodite, for instance, a passionate calling up of a warm and caring love between women, is attributed in many translations to Homer. And Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus*, which provides the central image for *An Epic Poem*, is most often described as gazing at her own reflection in a mirror, when in fact she looks out at the spectator. It's in these instances of misrecognition that the film sees the possibility of feminist intervention. Like the Homeric myth, the painting of the *Rokeby Venus* focuses on a problem of feminine sexuality, which art criticism attempts to resolve uneasily and unsuccessfully.

In *Ways of Seeing* John Berger describes the convention of the female nude in painting as one in which the woman who is the object of the painting watches herself being watched by a male spectator. Berger defines the 'male spectator' historically: in the hey-day of the female nude the function of such paintings was to confirm male ownership of trade and the arts by representing the female body as entirely available to the controlling male gaze. The female nude recognised the presence of the male spectator by looking back at him, or, in the cases where she was represented looking at herself, one or more male voyeurs would be included in the picture, to confirm the security of the male gaze. What is striking about the examples Berger chooses is the way the feminine body is constantly framed and contained, by a mirror, by a series of looks exchanged between model, artist and spectator, as though it might spill over the borders of the representation and escape. According to Berger, the female nude recognises her availability to the male spectator-owner, confirming existing male-female power relations. If the nude was painted

from the back, the head often turned to look over her shoulder at the spectator. The look was both a sexual provocation, an invitation, and a recognition of male power. Berger supports his argument by suggesting a simple substitution game: if you try replacing the female nude figure with a male nude, what happens? Are the power relations reversed? As feminist art critics have also pointed out, a simple role-reversal is not enough to radically challenge the authority of the male gaze at, and control of the feminine body. However, in spite of the cogency of Berger's account, he overlooks, perhaps significantly, an instability in these masculine images of the feminine body: the body itself, for instance, so excessive that it has to be fixed in place by a complex relay of looks and system of framing devices; the look of the woman back at the spectator, an active sexual invitation which contradicts the depiction of her body as the passive object of contemplation; the function of the mirror in many of the paintings, to forestall, or delay immediate gratification of the look at the feminine body—a defence against the horror that might be revealed?

Some of these instabilities are evident in the *Rokeby Venus*, which presents the woman's nude body from the back, the front accessible only to the Cupid who holds the mirror up to it. The Venus is depicted looking into the mirror, ostensibly at her own reflection, but her gaze is deflected back to the spectator. The constant misrecognition of this fact in descriptions of the painting suggests a number of things: that the sexual provocation implicit in the representation is so threatening that it has to be displaced onto female narcissism—the look of the woman at herself allowing the spectator to contemplate her body voyeuristically, in safety; and that, perhaps, since the body is presented as flawless, perfectly beautiful, this plenitude and the spectator's pleasure in it might be disturbed by the recognition that the image actively returns the spectator's look, reminding him of what is at risk.

An Epic Poem takes up this instability in the *Rokeby Venus* and plays around with it. The painting is juxtaposed with the Ares and Aphrodite myth, in which Helios, the male voyeur, spies on the lovers, bringing down the retribution of male society upon Aphrodite. The myth is re-enacted in the context of the First



Left, how *The Times* revealed the slashed Venus. Right, role reversal in *An Epic Poem*.

World War. As Helios looks in on the lovers, they act out the scene of the painting, playing with the mirror to alter what it reflects. The game of substitution and role-reversal with the Venus occurs again in the film, when it is specifically linked with the sexual ambiguity that the myth tries to resolve. Aphrodite is a militant suffragette, Ares a beautiful, effeminate young man who can take the place of Cupid on one hand, or Venus herself on the other. The pleasure and eroticism of the game is underlined when Aphrodite/Venus takes the place of Cupid, holds the mirror up to Ares/Venus, and turns to look directly into camera, explicitly breaking the conventions of cinema (Don't look at the Camera!), exploiting the instabilities of its system of looking. Her glance at the spectator is intercepted by the next shot, in which the modern woman leaves her typewriter to look into camera, meeting the Venus's look, and apparently exchanging glances directly with her and the spectator, until the camera moves back to reveal a mirror-shot: the modern woman, regarding herself, smiles and returns to her typewriter. The intimacy between Venus and spectator is broken. The woman's look at herself re-appropriates her image, questioning the spectator's ownership of it, and revealing the precariousness of the spectator's control:

In recent years, feminist theory has made it increasingly difficult to think how the female body might be represented, since all representation seems to recuperate femininity back into the prevailing system of masculine domination. As a way out of the impasse, feminist cinema has, on the one hand, represented the female body as essentially feminine (vaginal, clitoral) or, on the other hand,

refused to represent it at all. Rather than essentialism, or a puritanical refusal of the pleasures of looking, *An Epic Poem* prefers to exploit the contradictions and instabilities of the cinema's system of representation. In the process, the woman's body is transformed from an object of contemplation into a site of play and struggle, although there is still, always the risk of recuperation. The film is not afraid to take the risk.

The *Rokeby Venus* has a particular place in feminist history. The militant suffragette Mary Richardson, outraged by the treatment of Mrs Pankhurst in prison, decided to destroy the painting as a protest against a society which put a high price on images of woman's physical beauty, but subjected their bodies to imprisonment and force-feeding. The iconoclasm of her act brought love and war together again, challenging power relations in society. The militant suffragettes directed their violence against specific targets: the property of the male ruling class. Mary Richardson slashed the body of the Venus with an axe, attacking an image of love held dear by men for centuries, turning violence back against society in the name of a new ideal of femininity, which she defined in humanitarian terms: Justice, she claimed, was a more proper ideal for humankind than the mythological Venus.

Nonetheless, it's difficult to escape the thought that her rhetoric is belied by the sadistic desire motivating her attack. In one of the most disturbing images of the film, our suffragette heroine's face appears reflected in the Venus's mirror for a few seconds before she smashes the protective glass, smashing her own reflection. The sado-masochistic impulse behind the

suffragettes' militancy is striking: as though their desire to destroy male society hinged on their own destruction. Mary Richardson's act was directed against male myths of femininity, but also at the state and legal system that supported those myths, reinforcing male control. Her transgression was punished with imprisonment, and since the suffragettes conducted hunger-strikes to acquire the status of political prisoners, with the bodily abuse of force-feeding. The sadism of the Cat and Mouse Act, which allowed those hunger-strikers who became ill a temporary respite at home, before calling them back to prison for more torture, vividly exemplifies the punishment visited by society on women who actively challenge its terms in order to change it, returning them constantly to the position of victim rather than aggressor. The film uses detailed testimony from Sylvia Pankhurst's diary to describe the intensely painful experience of a hunger strike. These passages contrast sharply with the perfect beauty of the body of Venus. It's as if the woman's body can't escape its fate, the mutilation and abuse which is the other side of man's idealisation of femininity.

The suffragettes' imprisonment ended when militancy was suspended during the First World War, which brought some changes in attitudes to women's place in society, in marriage and the family. Women made a few gains in the workplace, though working conditions were still dire; at the same time, the need for a new labour force encouraged the beginnings of a welfare system for mothers, and state intervention in the family, trapping women again in the old myths. Since then, feminist and gay politics have contributed to changing traditional sexual roles, divorcing sexuality from reproduction, changing

child-care patterns, giving women more control over their bodies and their lives. The contemporary Women's Movement, like the suffragette movement, organises itself around love and solidarity between women, resisting male control in the very sphere it has always most forcibly, and most precariously held sway: the female body. The feminist body is very different from the ideal figure of Venus, property and object of the male gaze. It is active, questioning, exploratory, refusing fixed sexual divisions.

Perhaps, as the film suggests, it is the fear of his own extinction that causes man to constantly try to regain his control of the female body through violence. Or the fear of incest, the forbidden desire which causes him to construct woman as 'good' and 'bad' in the image of the two sides of the coin of masculine desire: the ideal woman, to be worshipped, and the base woman, to be punished. Man has created love in his image, which feminists must now confront in order to understand their own desires. *An Epic Poem* sees feminist resistance to man's concept of love in an attack on the dualism which underpins it: the feminine as the voice of heterogeneity and polymorphous desire. Our suffragette heroine rejects the fate of Aphrodite, inescapably the victim of man's love. In front of the *Rokeby Venus* in the National Gallery, she leaves Cupid holding the baby and takes action, marching out with her Three Graces to find her own, revolutionary concept of love.

An Epic Poem was directed by Lezli-An Barrett, edited by Alex Anderson, camera/lighting by Erika Stevenson. It is distributed through Circles. Thanks to Lezli-An for her help.

FEMINISM AND EXHIBITION

NOTES BY SHEILA WHITAKER

The following are my tentative thoughts about some questions raised by feminist politics and cinema exhibition. They are not a statement of policy.

The Tyneside Cinema, of which I am Director, is a major regional exhibition centre, with two public auditoria, one housing 400 and the other 150 seats, and Club screenings which take place mainly in the smaller auditorium. Seasons, which feature 80 to 100 films every two months, are usually centred around a theme, with the specific aim of identifying different kinds of practices in cinema history, and the connections that can be made between individual films, cinema in general, and society. Past seasons have dealt with themes as varied as the genre of the musical, British Cinema, war films, the work of Italian director Luchino Visconti, and the representation of women. Programming is entirely my responsibility and there are no limitations on the work we do. An enviable position, perhaps, but I'd like to explore some of the contradictions involved.

The question of cinema exhibition is a difficult one for feminist politics. It could be argued, and often is, that any film which is ideologically anti-female or misogynist should not be screened, on the grounds that simply to do so furthers the dominant ideas about women and the economy which supports them, when the feminist task should be to resist those ideas. But that argument

leaves us with perhaps a dozen films which provide acceptable images of women. This view of the non-availability of progressive films may seem unduly pessimistic, but it is really not surprising when we consider that our culture must represent (I use the term advisedly) a patriarchal society which places women in a subordinate role. Even a film which is not overtly anti-female must nevertheless be complicit in the reiteration of socially constructed gender roles. The choice is therefore between not screening anything other than progressive films which try to resist this process, or making the difficult decision to screen from a more 'liberal' perspective.

The 'liberal feminist' perspective may result in the following decisions: 1) not to screen soft or hard-core pornography, except in a mixed or women-only forum specifically aimed at raising issues of sexual politics in connection with pornography; and 2) not to offer a high public profile (such as that afforded by our larger cinema) to those films which feminists consider to contain an unacceptable degree of anti-female elements: examples of these last would be *Dressed to Kill* and *Les Valseuses*. This is *not* to suggest that they shouldn't be screened at all, but rather that the exhibition context must be such that questions of their ideology are raised, so that the process of undermining the pleasures they offer can begin. Misogynistic attitudes to women are

not going to stop just because films are not shown, or are censored in certain exhibition contexts: in my view it will only stop when people confront the social processes which oppress women. Although picketing can draw issues to the public's attention, it is not enough for people to know that women want a film banned; they must understand why and how the films are working in order to become involved in the issues raised by feminist politics. It seems to me that it's important to consider the factors surrounding the screening of films, not just the films themselves, or their misogynist content, in isolation.

The question of gaining the attention of an audience is crucial. It can probably be assumed that in a screening of a popular mainstream film most of the audience (whether female or male) is not only not feminist, but either unaware of the issues of sexual politics or actively opposed to them. In order to draw them in, a feminist programmer has therefore to walk the fine line between alerting this audience to the issues and unsettling them in their pleasures (when the promise of satisfaction brought them to the cinema in the first place) while creating an environment which will not intensify their resistance to the project or to the exhibition context itself.

It has been argued that major centres of film exhibition cannot carry out any significant intervention into film culture in these or any other political terms, because they are economically tied to satisfying the demands of a large popular audience. The alternative seems to be a reliance on a cinema of social practice in which production, distribution and exhibition are closely linked, and which is directed at a specific, small audience. Fundamentally important though this cinema is, it cannot reach those individuals who are not engaged in any organised political activity, such as Trade Unionism, or those who have any other unorganised political awareness. The large, general audience is, for the most part, unlikely to engage automatically with cinema aimed at specific political interests, and will probably be inhibited by it. Indeed, they are likely to be inhibited from attending screenings of *Dressed to Kill* or *Les Valseuses* in a major exhibition centre under the controlled conditions described above.

The argument against the social effectivity of

major exhibition centres suggests that their attempt to screen mainstream cinema in combination with educative and consciousness-raising activities cannot possibly achieve any significant success, particularly since they are to a large degree embedded in the traditional notions of film exhibition, and the maintenance of the industrial base of commercial cinema. Apparently, it is only in small-scale viewing situations that the desired results can be achieved. However, the increased tendency towards home-viewing, the one-way closed circuit of a production/exhibition industry directly aimed at private consumption, will suppress public debate of social and political issues even more. It is precisely because of this tendency that the existence of major resource centres which combine a pleasurable social context for the screening of films and video with activities imaginatively designed to raise substantive issues becomes even more important. How else can we attract the interest of an audience of non-feminists? Moreover, the large-scale facilities of these centres do not necessarily prevent local political activist groups from working within them, but rather the opposite, since their resources and the access they offer to a large general audience could significantly support their work, and vice versa, giving them the opportunity to move out of a restricted, marginal social space.

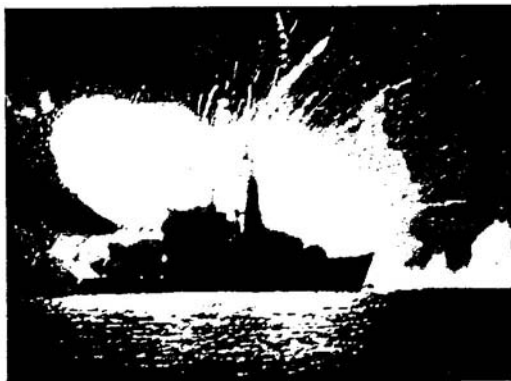
To my mind, the cessation of all mainstream exhibition in favour of 'progressive' screenings is not an adequate answer to the problem of social change. It is a kind of censorship which can only make a very partial impact in the overall national situation, and is therefore ineffective in itself as a strategy for intervention at all levels of society. Clearly, however, 'open' exhibition as an end in itself does not meet the problem either. Surely it is not simply a question of banning certain ideologically suspect films in favour of those with a feminist stance, which would not seriously affect the overall socio-political structures, but of alerting a general audience to issues it may never otherwise consider, that is, the feminist issues of the pleasures of cinematic representation in relation to the social construction of gender and its repressive mechanisms. Although we may be justified in censoring extreme examples of these repressive mechanisms in cinema (such as pornography) in a high public profile exhibition

forum, we must attempt to maintain a general audience with which certain consciousness-raising activities can be carried out, consolidated by parallel alternative screenings, activities and the provision of resources of information and knowledge, *in conjunction* with small-scale social practice activities.

It must be remembered that in our society feminist critiques of cinema and society, both in theory and in the practices of the Women's Movement, are still marginal and, more importantly, still resisted. This resistance, conscious or not, will not be overcome by a policy of censorship on the one hand, and

women-only and feminist screenings on the other, since, by definition, an audience outside committed feminists does not exist for them. A more productive project would recognise the different stages of awareness of each member of an audience, and allow that individual to insert her/himself into it at any point. Whatever else, this project must have the political aim of transforming the present cultural resistance to feminist issues and feminist films into opposition to anti-women and anti-feminist films, and therefore to the social context in which misogyny has its roots.

REPRESENTATIONS AT WAR



THE FALKLANDS AND THE MEDIA

- Should war reporting operate under different rules?
- What was the significance of the controversial *Panorama* programme?
- How was patriotism re-activated by the press?
- What was the effect of visual censorship of the war?
- Can the assumptions of recent TV coverage be traced back to the values of fictional British war films of the 1940s?

This weekend event will look at both press and television coverage of the Falklands war in detail, using screenings, workshops and guest speakers. Participants will include The Glasgow University Media Group, Ian Connell, and the Broadcasting Research Unit. Other speakers will be announced.

27/28th November, at the I.C.A., The Mall, London SW1

Fee: £5.50 (£3.50 unwaged). Places are limited so participants are advised to book as soon as possible.

Further details and application forms from SEFT, 29 Old Compton St, London W1V 6PL (01 734 5455).

WHOOSH!

GILLIAN SKIRROW READS 'A SEXUAL FIX'

*'Catapulted out of the sexual dark ages into a glittering age of sexual enlightenment and pleasure' we should be duly grateful. Or should we? The argument of **The Sexual Fix** is that we should temper gratitude with a much more critical understanding of the 'sexuality' we have been offered and of the power of its definition of our lives.*

The back cover of *The Sexual Fix* has many points of contact with the inside of the dustjacket of Foucault's *History of Sexuality Volume I*:

Why has there been such an explosion of discussion about sex in the West since the seventeenth century? ... Our contemporary faith in the liberating truth of sex is only the latest stage in a long process of expanding social regulation, normalisation and management of the individual.

But although the two texts occupy roughly the same space (and much of the work for both was being done at the same time, in the 1970s), they occupy that space very differently. Michel Foucault's book deals in abstractions and, as its title announces, has a mainly historical perspective. What Stephen Heath's book adds is a materiality not only of content but of position from which to understand. *The Sexual Fix*

privileges texture over perspective – its argument not immediately revealed by a glance through its chapters; its 'contents' page a surprise of quotations; its Notes-cum-Bibliography radically strange. The author speaks from a position within his subject, rather than taking a distance from it. Once begun the book's hold would be the envy of the novels, magazines and sex manuals of airport and railway bookstalls which are the raw material of the sexual fix. About the same length as the Paladin edition of *Mythologies* this essay on the mythology of 'sexuality' contains, or rather sets loose, over 300 quotations the colour of which is sometimes allowed to pull the reader's attention away from the focus of the text. Witness this one, 'from the last pages of Jilly Cooper's *Octavia*':

Then suddenly it happened – like a great, glorious, whooshing washing machine – it's the only way I can describe it – leaving me shuddering and shuddering with pleasure at the end, like the last gasps of the spin-dryer.

The argument is not only that the narrative of the orgasm – 'a little plot of sex: the Big O, a story in four episodes (not to be missed), from excitement to resolution' – is found in the

structure of the novel; but that the strength of the grasp of sexology on all forms of fictions – films, television, radio series, and especially books where it has even produced a new literary genre, the sexual-life testimony (the authentic document) – is determining the representation of our current sexuality. Just as Victorian pornography is permeated by medical conceptions, so our idea of sexuality today is crucially informed by the terms of sexology – ‘the clinical picture of the sex life, the laboratory of human response, documentation of that’.

At the end of all this lies the terrorism of sexology, fixing identity as sex – ‘you are your sexual nature or problem or whatever’ – and commanding a whole programme of behaviour – ‘you masturbate properly?’ – with orgasm as its pivot and goal:

men masturbating in private booths in a sex-shop cinema while watching films depicting people being beaten and tortured. All one has to say about this is ‘never again need you experience sexual frustration’, that’s really all?

Foucault, of course, never allows his own masculinity or authority to be disturbed by venturing into the concrete realm of the sex-shop, and yet there is no doubt that some branches of feminism will dismiss both books as male attempts to displace or deny the particular oppression of women in a phallogentric world, by a concern for the more general oppression of ‘sexuality’. Stephen Heath’s provocative

suggestion for opposing the dominance of ‘sexuality’ – which is to refuse it: ‘refuse to be heterosexual and homosexual, the opposite sex and a sex at all’ – almost invites that challenge. But that is the risk of essence that a not-woman writing about sexuality must take.

As an ideal to be worked towards, the not-being-a-sex-at-all has, in its very unthinkability, a radical attractiveness. While feminist opposition to phallogentrism is absolutely necessary, there is the contradiction that this can easily be incorporated (as ‘women going on about sex’) into what the dominant cultural representations are producing anyway. But the relations of the argument of *The Sexual Fix* to feminism would be another book, with a different audience and a different address. The present one is careful to leave space for that debate, ending polemically rather than concluding in any academic or authoritative sense. The form of the last chapter is a dialogue between the author and a fictional liberal opponent who accuses him of being a ‘poorly disguised Lord Longford or worse’. Ironically, though it was prompted by the publishers’ request for ‘something personal’ from the author (the Heath sexual-life testimony?) the dialogue is perhaps the least personal part of the book. It is also less glittering than the rest. But, as a way of allowing the main points to be re-stated in clear terms, it is to be welcomed as part of this book’s enlightened and pleasurable strategy of availability.


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'DRESSED TO KILL'

A DISCUSSION BY GIOVANNA ASSELLE
AND BEHROZE GANDHY

*The following article is an edited version of a lunchtime lecture on **Dressed To Kill** given by Giovanna Asselle and Behroze Gandhi at the National Film Theatre on May 11 1982. Their presentation was one in a series of discussions of Box Office American Cinema organised by the Education Department of the British Film Institute and **City Limits** magazine. There were two screenings of **Dressed To Kill** at the NFT, on the evenings before and after the lecture, the argument for this being that it enabled the audience to re-view the film in the light of the lecture. Both performances of the film were picketed and leafleted, and much anger was expressed that **Dressed To Kill** should be screened during the May season of feminist celebration 'Women Live'. One protester made this point by changing the theatre's banner from 'Women Live at the NFT' to 'Women Slashed and Murdered at the NFT'. The lunchtime lecture attracted a larger and different audience from usual. Women who had picketed the screenings attended, as did a number of women who held different positions on the desirability of showing the film. The protesters criticised the lecture and the screenings on the following grounds:*

1) The lecture should have been scheduled for immediately after the screening. Holding it the next day meant that one audience saw the film and another one attended the discussion.

2) Screening the film and discussing it in a prestigious national venue like the NFT gave the film a cultural validity.

We are publishing Giovanna Asselle and Behroze Gandhi's lecture as a contribution to the important debate around what strategies feminists should take up in relation to representations of violence against women. (The issue editors)

An item which recently appeared in London's evening paper, the *New Standard*, throws the best light on the controversy that surrounded the film *Dressed To Kill*. The *Standard*, boasting about its contribution to the Falklands war effort, listed *Dressed To Kill* as one of the videocassettes flown out to boost the morale of the boys in the Task Force.

At its release both in America and in this country, *Dressed To Kill* aroused a wave of protests, especially from the Women's Movement. This public outrage embarrassed its defenders. As a result there has been little subsequent discussion of the film, though the debate on the effects and desirability of showing violent attacks on women and the butchering of their bodies by male attackers is still going on (interestingly, not only in women's groups, but also in the popular press, generally not characterised by a particularly sensitive and progressive approach to issues related to the treatment of women in the media).

For example, the same *New Standard* carried a brief comment on a new release, *Visiting Hours*, labelled by the writer as one of the 'slashers':

Such films have one main attraction: they exist to provide patrons, usually male, with opportunities of seeing knives being stuck into women. That shower-bath scene in *Psycho* all those years ago still provides this unlovely sub-genre of horror cinema with today's main bloodbath. In this case, it's a feminist TV reporter (Lee Grant) whose anti-chauvinist tirade against a male bully triggers off a watching psychotic. Armed with a flick knife as long as his arm, he carves his way through the scenery until he gets to her. ... Be it noted that although Mr Ferman, our chief censor, still bans *The Story of O* in its entirety from our screens, his Board passes this violent series of acts against women. I'm not being too cynical, I think, to conclude that if you're treated roughly and like it, the way the lady known as 'O' did, you are regarded as a dangerous example and banned; but if you end up with a knife in your guts, as the women do in *Visiting Hours*, you are permitted to be on view as an object of male titillation. Better a dead female than a deviant one - eh, Mr Ferman?¹

This short comment marks a point of convergence of two very different movements' attitudes toward the banning of images of violence against women: feminist groups and the Mary Whitehouse lobby, which, though starting from opposite positions, appear (in the public eye) to reach similar conclusions, censorship and banning. Although it isn't difficult to guess which one has exerted more influence on the *New Standard*, the result is an apparently widespread consensus on the undesirability of such representations. While we share this repugnance for these misogynist images, we feel it is important to recognise their existence in order to confront them. Silence is not a strategy.

But for the moment we'd like to leave the question of violence against women and examine the initial critical reactions to *Dressed To Kill*. The controversy around the film was heightened by the fact that the film appealed to the aesthetic sensibilities of several critics, who had fun spotting innumerable references to Hitchcock's classics, skilful camera work and various cinematic tricks. Like Carpenter's *Halloween*, and possibly even more so, *Dressed To Kill* seemed to counterbalance its gory and sinister content with the implication that this was after all only an amusing game staged by a clever movie brat. Moreover, Brian De Palma had previously acquired a considerable reputation as a politically conscious film-maker, aware of the

voyeuristic mechanisms of the cinema and, in the case of *Blood Sisters*, analysing the ways in which women are oppressed in patriarchal society. His frequent references to Hitchcock suggested a familiarity with the historical dimension of his film vocabulary and lent him credibility as a 'serious' filmmaker. Indeed, some have argued that De Palma's reworking of Hitchcock's concerns added a 'political dimension':

*His insistence on the spectator as voyeur, continually underlined by his breakdown of screen space into frames within frames, derives directly from his most important influence, Hitchcock. But even more than Hitchcock, De Palma is aware of the political dimension of what often appears in Hitchcock as a purely moral problem.*²

And Robin Wood saluted the director's films as one of the most interesting developments of American cinema in the '70s, following 'the seminal work of *Psycho* which definitively established two concepts crucial to the horror genre's subsequent development: the monster as human psychotic/schizophrenic, and the revelation of horror as existing at the heart of the family'.³

When *Dressed To Kill* was released in the United States in the summer of 1980, it was hailed by David Denby in *New York Magazine* as 'the first great American movie of the 80s', and by Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* as 'a witty, romantic, psychological horror film' and the work of 'unmistakable talent'. The *New Yorker's* Pauline Kael was ecstatic:

Now, in his thirteenth feature film, he has become a true visual storyteller. He knows where to put the camera and how to make every move count, and his timing is so great that when he wants you to feel something he gets you every time. His thriller technique, constantly refined, has become insidious, jewelled. It's hardly possible to find a point at

¹ Alexander Walker, the *New Standard*, April 15, 1982.

² *Edinburgh International Film Festival News*, August 1976.

³ Robin Wood, 'American Cinema in the '70s: Sisters', *Movie* 27/28, p 50.

which you could tear yourself away from this picture.⁴

One of the moments of the film most praised by Kael is a sequence set in New York's Metropolitan Museum. Here the film's ill-fated woman lead, Kate Miller (played by Angie Dickinson) pursues and is pursued by a smiling stranger in a pick-up scene which ranges back and forth across the gallery. It's a fifteen minute long game of hide and seek for both spectators and characters, realised without the aid of dialogue. Kael singles out the sequence for its complex camera movements and visual humour.

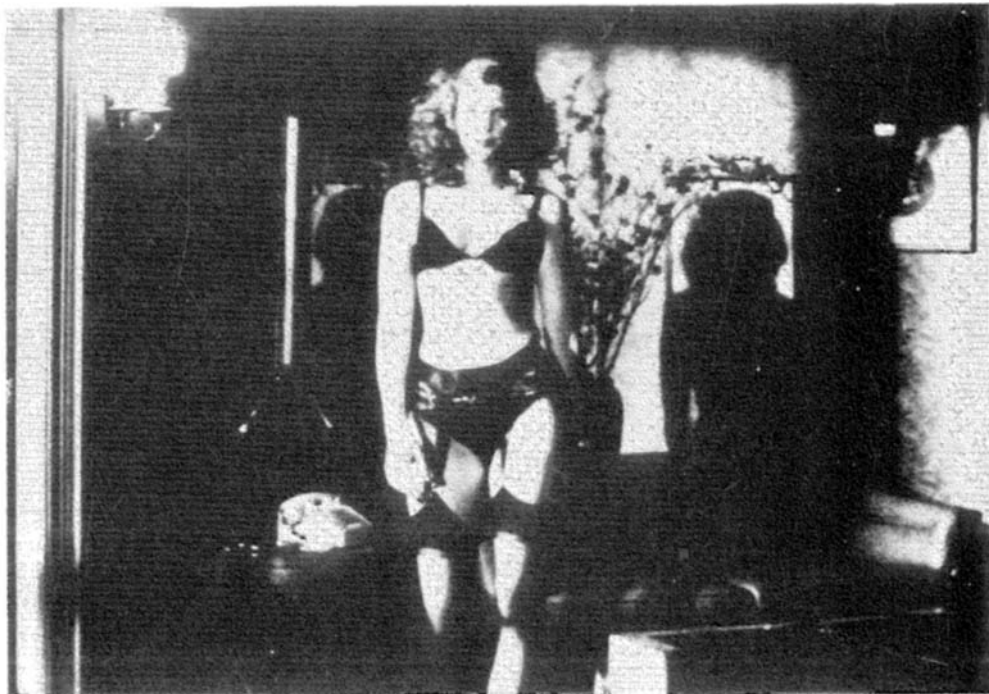
*What makes **Dressed To Kill** funny is that it's permeated with the distilled essence of impure thoughts. De Palma has perfected a near-surreal poetic voyeurism – the stylized expression of a blissfully dirty mind. He doesn't use art for voyeuristic purposes; he uses voyeurism as a strategy and a theme – to fuel his satiric art. He underlines the fact that voyeurism is integral to the nature of movies. In the Metropolitan sequence, we catch glimpses of figures slipping in and out at the edges of the frame, and there are other almost subliminal images.*⁵

Conversely, we would suggest that the question of voyeurism is central to the understanding of this film's weaknesses. Pauline Kael says that De Palma 'underlines the fact that voyeurism is integral to the nature of movies', but that's just about all he does with it. It's a theme borrowed from his mentor, Hitchcock, but lacking that director's insight into the mechanisms of voyeurism and its implications for the viewer. In her essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey points out that in Hitchcock 'the male hero does see precisely what the audience sees'.

*Moreover, in these cases the hero portrays the contradictions and tensions experienced by the spectator. In **Vertigo** in particular, but also in **Marnie** and **Rear Window**, the look is central to the plot, oscillating between voyeurism and fetishistic fascination. As a twist, a further manipulation of the normal viewing process which*

⁴ Pauline Kael, 'Master Spy, Master Seducer', the *New Yorker*, August 4, 1980.

⁵ *ibid.*



Liz Blake as the decoy in *Dressed to Kill*: 'the stylized expression of a blissfully dirty mind'?

in some sense reveals it, Hitchcock uses the process of identification normally associated with ideological correctness and the recognition of established morality and shows up its perverted side. Hitchcock has never concealed his interest in voyeurism, cinematic and non-cinematic. His heroes are exemplary of the symbolic order and the law—a policeman (*Vertigo*), a dominant male possessing money and power (*Marnie*)—but their erotic drives lead them into compromised situations. The power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned on to the woman as the object of both. . . . Hitchcock's skilful use of identification processes and liberal use of subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist draw the spectators deeply into his position, making them share his uneasy gaze. The audience is absorbed into a voyeuristic situation within the screen scene and diegesis which parodies his own in the cinema.⁶

What the Museum sequence lacks is a consistent male point of view which would question critically the relationship of the audience to the camera and the act of looking. Where in *Vertigo*—specifically evoked in this particular sequence—James Stewart spies Kim Novak in a museum and we see her through his eyes, De Palma's *hommage* multiplies the viewpoints (Kate's, the stranger's, the spectator's).

The Museum sequence is followed by one in which Kate Miller is physically seduced by the stranger in the back of a cab. Again, there are references to Hitchcock: Kate's cry (of pleasure, surprise, dismay) blends with the noise of a car horn in a reminder of *The 39 Steps*, and the pan on the building immediately afterwards evokes the first shot in *Psycho*. The sequence carries on the theme of voyeurism, underlined by the taxi driver's look into the mirror. This time we are invited to identify with a male onlooker while watching the sex play in the cab, but the identification is feeble and shortlived. The taxi driver will disappear as quickly as he arrived on the scene, reinforcing the fact that throughout the film there is no consistent point of view, no fixed reference for identification. The spectator is never implicated in the act of looking, never made to feel uneasy and aware of his or her role as accomplice in the action on the screen.

Another argument in Kael's piece which we'd like to contradict concerns De Palma's supposed directorial mastery in manipulating the audience. Referring to the nightmare sequence in the

psychiatric hospital at the end of the film, Kael writes: 'This picture is such a unified, confident piece of work that De Palma can even make the image hazy and provide a stylized chorus out of Bedlam—giving it away that something isn't really happening—and still you're terrified.'⁷

This, one could reply, is exactly where the cheapness of the film's tricks resides. Dreams and fantasy sequences are ideally suited to introduce any element capable of attracting an audience without the restraints imposed by a tight narrative structure. Interestingly, the film, whose plot could survive very well without them, begins and ends in a circular fashion with such sequences, a female fantasy and a female nightmare, both including soft-porn shower scenes and attacks. Their inclusion in dream sequences seems an attempt to justify their existence by throwing a light of unreality, humour and playfulness on them, provoking knowledgeable winks between the director and a cinéophile audience also catered to by the split screen sequences, the filmic references, etc.

While these devices have been praised by some critics, others see in them a lack of moral concern comparing unfavourably with Hitchcock's work—not on the level of Laura Mulvey's arguments about how cinema constructs a point of view which either implicates an audience or doesn't—but from a less interesting and more predictable humanist perspective. George Morris writes in *Film Comment*:

*There is plenty of terror in Dressed To Kill, but the aesthetic distance that separates De Palma from Hitchcock can be measured by the absence of any emotion approaching pity.*⁸

(It's interesting to note how this conclusion runs opposite to the remarks in the Edinburgh Film Festival programme note mentioned earlier.)

Closer examination of the underlying qualities which govern the structure of *Dressed To Kill* discovers more than the usual share of narcissism which generally characterises De Palma's films. He wrote and directed this one, and it is full of

⁶ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, p 15.

⁷ Kael, *op cit*.

⁸ George Morris, *Film Comment*, September/October 1980, vol 16, no 5, p 54.



Hommage to the shower bath murder: the first fantasy sequence in Dressed to Kill.

allusions to the director's personal life. One reading of *Dressed To Kill* even goes as far as suggesting that the character Peter Miller (the son of the female victim Kate Miller) becomes the point of projection for De Palma in the film.⁹ There is perhaps some trivial biographical evidence to substantiate this claim, as the actor who plays Peter, Keith Gordon, played Denis Byrd in the admittedly autobiographical *Home Movies*; and Nancy Allen, who plays Liz Blake, the young prostitute who helps Peter find the killer, took the part of Kristina in *Home Movies* and is in fact De Palma's wife. Without resorting to a Freudian reading of the film, which might argue that the Dr Elliot/Bobbi 'monster' is an Oedipal projection of Peter Miller's unconscious desire to punish both his mother and the woman who takes her place, it can still be asserted that even on a conscious level the character is very disturbing and even rather sinister.

The young computer buff is introduced into the film immediately after a sex scene between his mother and step-father. The computer's noises are linked to the harsh sounds of the radio during the previous scene, setting them apart

from the slushy romanticism of Pino Donaggio's score in the opening fantasy sequence. Kate Miller enters Peter's room as he works on his high school science project. We never find out exactly what his computer can accomplish, but it serves two important thematic functions: it is said to have an unusual capacity to deal with binary numbers, immediately establishing the motif of doubling which will permeate the film (Liz Blake taking over the role of female victim after Kate Miller is killed; a police woman dressing up as the transvestite killer; the bracketing of the film within two fantasies of women attacked in the shower; and the dual identity of the killer, emphasised by the constant reflection of Michael Caine's image in mirrors). Secondly, the computer suggests a self-engrossed technocratic masculinity, whose phallic properties are underlined when Kate first

⁹ Royal S Brown, 'Dressed to Kill: Myth and Male Fantasy in the Horror/Suspense Genre', *Film Psychology Review*, Summer/Fall 1980, vol 4 no 2, pp 169-182.



Peter Miller, one of his inventions and Liz Blake: 'I could build a woman out of me.'

suggests that the boy name his invention after himself and then jokes, 'I'll tell your grandmother you're working on your Peter.'

So even before we meet the transvestite psychiatrist Dr Elliot, De Palma has already created Peter the boy and Peter the computer, which foreshadows the Dr Elliot/Bobbi double which causes his mother's brutal death. An extremely important line which is almost thrown away towards the end of the film, suggests that Peter will take over where Dr Elliot/Bobbi left off. Following Dr Elliot's capture Liz clinically explains to him the mechanics of a sex-change operation. Peter, who never shows any sexual interest in her, replies: 'Instead of building a computer I could build a woman out of me'.

This motif of creator and creation parallels the relationship of De Palma and his film-making. On the one hand the director busily plays his games with cinematic allusions—signalling Hitchcock which in turn signals De Palma ad infinitum. He side-steps issues by winking at the audience, a gimmick which—as previously asserted—appears to be an end in itself, devoid of deeper insights into the mechanisms of voyeurism in the cinema. But while he might

like to think that he is in control of the intricacies of the plot, this scene could suggest fears and desires beyond his control. Terrorising women is not just a set piece of the thriller/horror genre (which De Palma always asserts he is playing with¹⁰) but something that could point to underlying fears of women and their expressions of sexuality...

Meanwhile, the question persists: why has *Dressed To Kill* been singled out for attack by members of the Women's Movement? Is the case for its censorship justified?

Apart from a narrative logic which would punish a woman's afternoon of sexual pleasure with death, and the violence that surrounds all 'women in peril' movies, feminists have particularly objected to the rape, necrophilia and throat-slashing sequences presented as women's fantasies. An advertisement for a march protesting the film in New York read '*Dressed To Kill* asserts that women crave physical abuse, that humiliation, pain, and brutality are essential

¹⁰ Ralph Appelbaum, 'Techniques of the Horror Film', *Film-makers' Monthly*, September 1980, vol 13 no 11, p 35.

to our sexuality.'¹¹ Similarly, Caroline Aspergius argued in *Spare Rib*, 'We can easily make the connection between fantasy and reality. After all, De Palma infers, if a woman fantasises about rape, does she not invite the reality of that act?'¹² The popular slogan of feminist campaigns against films like these is 'Porn is the theory; rape is the practice'.¹³ But the clinical evidence for such an argument is, to put it briefly, conflicting, and a causal connection between the consumption of pornography and violence against women has not been proved.¹⁴

We want to offer a different perspective to the argument about the effect of violence on the screen, without seeking to praise or justify it. Hollywood cinema in genres like the thriller, horror films, gangster movies, westerns and even melodramas, is littered with examples of women punished by being maimed or killed – both for expressing their sexuality as well as withholding it. Women have always been victims of violence in the cinema, a fact which is especially highlighted in horror. But the modern horror film foregrounds female sexuality as that which is punished, consciously inscribing it as transgression in the narrative. *Dressed To Kill* shares this explicit association of sex and punishment with other contemporary horror films like *Halloween* (where all the sexually active females are eliminated) *Friday the Thirteenth*, *He Knows You're Alone*, etc, as well as contemporary melodramas like *Looking for Mr Goodbar*.

Psycho offers a useful illustration of the opposite strategy. When Marion Crane is killed by Norman Bates the effect is very startling. After all, being killed for stealing \$40,000 when you are going to return it is not exactly meeting your just deserts. The real reason for Crane's elimination may be her expression of sexuality in the hotel bedroom in Phoenix¹⁵, but the narrative makes no clear connection between the two episodes. Conversely, the least (most?) one

could say about De Palma is that he dispenses with all subtleties. Kate Miller is killed (whether one agrees with the reading that Peter is the real villain or not) for a very specific reason, her venture beyond marital sexuality to a casual encounter with a stranger. No ambiguity here.

Terrorising women is a recognised convention of the horror film, a genre in which the desire to punish the female is especially heightened. The psychopathic human 'monsters' who today replace King Kong or the Creature from the Black Lagoon make the target explicit: the threat of female sexuality. This may be a virulent backlash against feminism, but it is also an exposé of a traditional strategy of the cinema. To that extent these films increase our awareness of how culture, particularly film culture, positions the sexes.

Unless there is a causal connection between representations and acts of violence, suppressing or boycotting films like *Dressed To Kill* will produce no challenge to physical attacks on women. Ultimately such a strategy will achieve no more than the aim of the Whitehouse lobby – the stifling of all debate. At the very least films like *Dressed To Kill* do quite the opposite – provoking urgent discussion of the problematic connection between sexuality and aggression.¹⁶

¹¹ *Jump Cut*, no 23, p 32.

¹² *Spare Rib*, February 1981.

¹³ cf Diana Hume George, 'The Myth of Mythlessness and the New Mythology of Love: Feminist Theory on Rape and Pornography', *Enclitic* 8, Fall 1980, pp 29-41.

¹⁴ cf *The Home Office Report of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1979, pp 61-95.

¹⁵ Raymond Bellour, 'Psychosis, Neurosis, Perversion', *Camera Obscura*, vol 1 no 3-4, pp 105-132.

¹⁶ George, op cit.

THIS SADDER RECOGNITION

SUE ASPINALL TALKS TO RAYMOND WILLIAMS ABOUT 'SO THAT YOU CAN LIVE'

¹ Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom, *Preface to Film*, Film Drama, 1954.

² Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Fontana 1974.

³ Raymond Williams, 'A Lecture on Realism', *Screen* Spring 1977, vol 18, no 1, pp 61-74.

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, Verso 1981, p 228.

⁵ *ibid*, p 224.

⁶ *ibid*, p 227.

⁷ *ibid*, p 224.

⁸ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Chatto and Windus, 1973.

RAYMOND WILLIAMS IS best known for his novels and his writing on literature and culture. His working life has predominantly been concerned with the written word. Yet he has also maintained a consistent interest in visual media, co-writing *Preface to Film*¹ after the war, and then more recently, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*², and 'A Lecture on Realism'³ for a 1976 SEFT weekend school. In the collection of interviews published as *Politics and Letters*, he discusses the potential of film and television as being greater than that of the novel 'where the problems of cultural production are very severe'.⁴

Williams has been centrally concerned with the realisation of what he calls 'the realist project'. In *Politics and Letters*, he outlines his sense of optimism in the potential of film and television to develop this project. The mobility of the camera, he argues, might 'permit the resumption of public actions in fully realised locations of history'⁵ and might be able to overcome the 'individual-society' or 'family-environment'⁶ polarity upon which previous dramatic forms have relied. 'It is in the combination of three directions,' he continues, 'the more mobile dramatic forms of the camera, direct relationship with more popular audiences, and development of subjunctive actions, that I think the future of a new realism lies.'⁷ The relationship between Williams' involvement with the recent Cinema Action film *So that you can live* and his conception of realism was the focus of this interview.

Screen: How did you and your wife get involved in the film?

I had a letter which said that Cinema Action were going to be making this film, that they'd got it to a fairly late stage and that they'd been using *The Country and the City*⁸ to draw on for certain ideas. At that stage it was mainly would I like to look at the rough cut to see that the use they'd made of the book seemed all right to me; really more in a negative way of

did I have any objections in using the book in that way? Well, I saw the rough cut without music, perhaps a couple of months before it was shown at the London Film Festival, and they asked me if I could suggest one or two other sentences either from *The Country and the City* or from somewhere else, because they wanted something at the beginning and the end which would try and draw it together. First it wasn't easy to find any; second, there's a problem of language anyway, from the language of that kind of book into the film, which is mainly using conversation, ordinary speech. So it ended by my saying that I would write, having seen the rough cut, a piece for the beginning and the end; deliberately writing it a different way, but to fit what was already the evident shape and seam of the film: expressing my own ideas but also writing almost as it were professionally to the shape of the film as it was.

How much did you have to do with the final shape? Were you involved in any of those discussions?

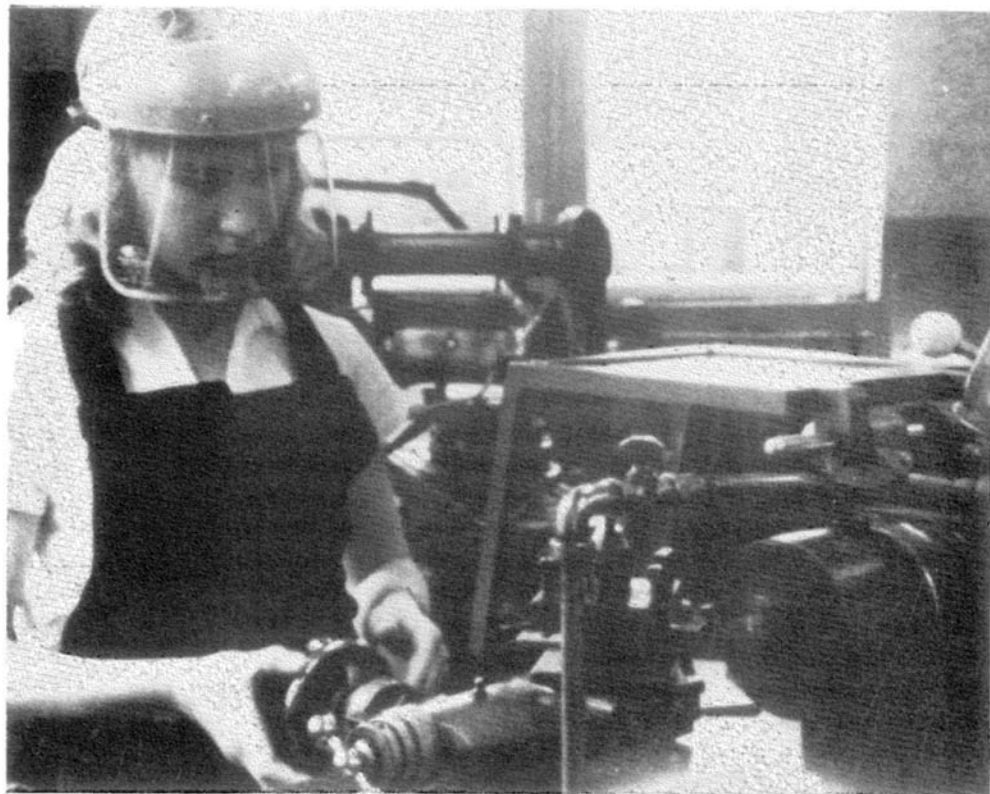
No, the rough cut that I saw wasn't identical of course with the finally edited version, but the basic shape was there – I mean the main order of sequences, and above all the basic method of the film, of not having an external narrative voice. All those decisions had been taken. There were some differences, especially towards the end and there was the whole problem of music which was still then very open and would obviously be rather crucial and so there was some discussion and my wife also discussed it – but simply having seen the rough cut and talking for what, half an hour, an hour afterwards.

How do you feel about the way your texts were used in the film? Were you satisfied with them?

I find that I'm always uneasy when I find people quoting things from me; I prefer my own texts, you know, in the form in which they existed – I don't take easily to detachment. I couldn't judge how much I thought they helped to clarify and I thought one or two did more than others. I was much happier in that sense with the one or two pieces I wrote for the beginning and end because then I was responding to what was happening in the film. I did see a problem when Diana was trying to read the one very difficult piece –

From The Country and the City.

She struggled with that language – as who would not, in a way, because it wasn't even meant for reading aloud. Somebody said, in one of the reviews, this isn't a voice from outside the film but from inside it; but it seemed to me at a different level to dramatise all the difficulties. The difference with which she read the two sentences I'd written specially for the film, which were written in speech rhythm and therefore, although she read them, sounded like speech, was noticeable. On another level,



'This whole relation between work and learning': Diane Butts in metalwork class.

there was the sense of somebody *struggling* with these ideas, and I felt that particularly too about that ferociously complicated last sentence from *Politics and Letters* which goes up in text near the end of the film. It seems to me such a difficult sentence, I mean it's hard enough in print.

Would you have liked the film to be markedly different?

Well no, it was their project. It was really interesting in the sense that I haven't seen material before which had followed a group of people (in this case, a family) through over time to that extent, and this seemed to be the great interest of it. Particularly having caught the girl Diana at a stage when you do see her turning from one person into another – from a child into a young woman – this seemed to me extremely interesting. Then there was a lot of interest in the fact that some of the material was familiar within a documentary tradition – that is to say, the scene of the strike. It was the sort of material that left documentary makers in the '30s went and looked for. Now what interested me about the film – I've heard this argument in Wales and elsewhere – is that that is at the beginning, whereas in the whole thematic of left documentary of the '30s, it would have been the climax. Collective militancy, very convincingly done, both as represented and as lived, is the starting point after which all the

social and economic difficulties of a different time begin. Now that's what interested me—that it's that way round. I therefore wouldn't, myself, have changed the shape. One could easily have had something like that militancy at the end. The point was, the *difficulty* of a collective project and of a family sticking together and I thought that was, for the times, for the '80s, more interesting.

⁹ Raymond Williams,
*The Fight for
Manod*, Chatto and
Windus, 1979.

In a way, I thought that So that you can live repeats what some people have seen as the weakness of your novel The Fight for Manod⁹ which is the absence of any force capable of resistance and the sadness that you are left with. Do you see that as realism in the sense that it reflects the way things actually are in the '80s?

You could answer that question at two levels. You could say, is it realistic in the sense of, 'Is that how it's going?'—I mean the repeated failure under extraordinary provocation, to generate sufficient collective action. At this ordinary realistic level, it's true, it's unarguable. One opportunity after another for collective action—even in an area with a long tradition of militant organisation, like South Wales—has been, you could say, missed, even at times rejected. So at the level of the naive version of realism, you know, 'Does it happen in the world?' that I think is right. But the second seems to be a much more interesting case, which is that unless you realise that the problem of action is now within a changed set of social relations, in which the obvious lines of action are not to be simply recovered from some past repertory, where people know what the forms of action are; that unless you realise that, you won't generate these actions anyway. In other words, it's not simply saying empirically these things have not happened; but saying there are genuine social causes why they've not happened. And this has had to do with the area of experience that's been included in the film and the ways in which these areas have been relating or failing to relate to forms of struggle: the emphasis in the film, first, on a woman growing into either available work or into the difficulty of getting any kind of work at all, the role of education, this whole relation between work and learning. What I've been arguing is that until it's seen in that way, you cannot generate the action. And that's not just at the empirical level that strong collective action has not been taken, which is undoubtedly true, but there are reasons why this is so, and to discover the reasons and imaginatively realise them is one of the ways of generating action, which you then can't mime and say 'Well, we'll invent for fiction or documentary purposes some such action because it will be upbeat rather than downbeat.'

But one of the things you've talked about in relation to realism is the development of what you call 'subjunctive action'—suggesting, trying out different ways to go forward within the cultural forms. But the film doesn't do that, does it?

I don't think even within the most extended version of documentary, it

could. I think by its nature it is tied to named people and places.

So that's a difference between documentary and fiction?

I think it is, although you know one's very uneasy about these restrictive notions of documentary, but I think the subjunctive action would necessarily be a matter of fiction. And you know I wrote *The Fight for Manod* in one style at the same time as I was writing *The Volunteers*¹⁰ in another and *The Volunteers* is precisely a subjunctive one, because not only is it placed ahead in time, but it does presuppose actions which not only haven't occurred because of the date, but haven't yet occurred because of the stage of social development, of saying if these things happened, then what would occur? And in *The Fight for Manod* – I don't want to talk about the novels rather than the film, but it might clarify the difference – there was a very strong sense – after all this is what the whole plot was about – of something new about to happen, which people wanted to happen, and then of finding the very complicated blockages which prevented it happening, blockages at all sorts of levels, which seemed to me the difference between a subjunctive action and simple futurism. You know, futurism saying, here's this different situation and we simply leap to it.

Do you think that the formal strategies of the film which are associated with avant-garde film-making, might make it inaccessible to audiences that are unfamiliar with these strategies?

I very much doubt it, actually; I think it's a thing to be tested out. One of the interesting things about this film is the Cinema Action method of working: they take their films around and have discussions afterwards at showings.

I would have thought, you see, that the superb demotic style of *Housing Problems* (Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, 1935) all the documentary in that tradition, is now more inaccessible – but this is just my guess about where people's minds are. I think that at the technical level, the degree of accommodation to what were not so long ago avant-garde techniques, is very considerable; this has happened very fast through television. This is very much a thing to test empirically, I think. I think the discussions after the showing of this film will be at least as valuable as the film itself.

You have talked about it being formalist simply to look at the formal strategies of a film or a novel – of the necessity to take into account the total situation, the context of production and distribution –

Yes, what social relations it is built from and what it presupposes. Suppose you'd had a final sequence in which the people themselves were reflecting on their situation, and you had something therefore which was capable of more articulating, at least the questions. That, it seems to me, still remains a perfectly possible strategy. It's still in the course of discus-

sion, but the next Cinema Action film, I understand, is to include a method which will distinctly provide another point of view which is not simply part of the action of the film but which is commenting on it, and raising questions about it. I think that is rather important because otherwise the distinction between realism/authenticity and realism/becoming conscious of social relations and putting questions to them – that remains confused.

*There's another term that you've used, in relation to realism, which you call the fourth term, 'the consciously interpretative in relation to a particular political viewpoint'¹¹; you distinguish between the Loach-Garnett-Allen TV drama **The Big Flame**, in which the lessons are only learnt by successive generations re-enacting the same struggles, and a Brechtian strategy which claims that you can learn lessons through analysis. That second level of realism doesn't seem to be present in this film.*

I think that's true. If you look at the way the feeling moves in that film, it moves so much towards that particular family and particularly towards the women in it. The whole stance is so, as it were, attentive/non-intrusive, that the posing of questions, which would require a quite different stance, would require a very sharp break of feeling, inside the film. I don't just mean that it would be a different tack, because as I say there's been discussion of the next film where you could include from the beginning a convention through a character which would allow that posing of questions – certainly historical, social and political questions from a different position. With this one I have the feeling that the flow was so committed to just following these people, that it almost excluded the analytic.

The film doesn't seem to raise any questions of political or economic strategy.

But the argument is that until you've grasped a number of obstacles that have been put in people's way, and the pressures on them, and understand it in that way from inside, then you can't generate the action. After all, Shirley is a marvellously convincing model of an image on which the left has quite properly based a lot of its feeling: she's the active woman worker, trade unionist, advancing at every level yet still living this very complete life in herself and in her community – and you see her running into all kinds of trouble which don't follow at all from her actions, but simply from the fact that larger forces have broken in. The argument as I've heard it in Wales is, what's the relative importance of the inherited pieties of the labour movement, that by militant action you can change the world – which is obviously a general truth – and what happens in relatively marginalised groups, in this case women workers, in a relatively marginalised economy, in this case South Wales? What happens which puts pressure on and makes militancy difficult? There aren't answers – but the questions don't seem to me to be wrong, because this is what one asks in South Wales now. I mean, it's what one asks in Britain

now. One wouldn't have projected a Britain with three million unemployed, and everything else that's been happening, in which there would be so little, really effective, sustained levels of action. It's been dispersed, it's been blocked, and it's very urgent really to know why. I don't think the film can tell us why, but it's one of several explorations of why.

I agree that the film tries to understand Shirley's experience from her point of view, which is I think quite unusual, but my conception of realism is that it also has the power to explain, to help you to understand the total situation; and I feel that the film just tries to understand Shirley, it doesn't try to understand the total situation and it leaves out so many things that you need to know in order to understand.

I think there's a genuine problem here because, first of all, I think the film was made as it went along, you know, there's a long gap, and a sense of them feeling their way into the situation. One of the criticisms in South Wales – a very minority one – was that here are these people from London coming in and looking in on it. Well of course at a most literal level it's true, but everything about the nature of the film-making is opposite to that. You could even say at times, to a fault. I mean the thing has been accepted very much on its own terms. Now then the problem is, how *do* you explain in this broader sense?

If you contrast it again with the documentary tradition of the '30s, I was talking to Cinema Action people about *Housing Problems* which I'd seen again. In *Housing Problems* you've got a wonderful clarity of explanation, precisely because there's more separation from the people being observed, who are really objects of a social problem rather than people, and second because there's great confidence in the relatively simple solution. The irony at the end of *Housing Problems* is that what they project are the tower block horrors of post-war working class life – which after all came in the same way from outside the class – solutions determined beyond it. Now, you lose a lot I think if you lose that kind of control, clarity, simplicity, singleness of direction, explanation. There were times when I wanted *So that you can live* to be brought together in a different way and when it seemed to me that the things that were being suggested from the references to *The Country and the City* couldn't in any sense wholly explain this set of problems. But I think their method was this exploratory one, and I think it's interesting to see how far it worked.

I had a film made directly from *The Country and the City*, a television film which Mike Dibb made, which is very close to the book although it's highly selective from it – it takes a theme and then finds a practical, visual embodiment of it. It provides a very direct comparison between the type of documentary which says here is an intellectual argument, how can we film it – which in that particular case meant saying instead of the whole argument about the country house, let us find a country house, look at its history and half the film was built round that – but there's no continuity of people in it; and then *So that you can live*, where a set of ideas is grafted onto what had begun and continues as observing a family

in the processes of change. They are very different in pace, in method, from each other, and it would be good to put them side by side because they would be a way of exploring just these problems we've been discussing.

*The themes that Cinema Action focus on are all themes to do with decline – the libraries and so on – rather than ones which might explain in a wider sense the things which are happening, like Gwyn Williams' recent article in **Marxism Today**¹², which pointed to the rise of the Tories and the decline of Labourism, and how that corresponds to the deproletarianisation of Wales, or anything to do with Welsh nationalism – a whole political dimension which is left out of the film. It's simply recording the experience of loss and decline.*

¹² Gwyn Williams, 'Mother Wales, get off me back?', *Marxism Today*, December 1981, pp 14-20.

It's very interesting that Gwyn, who is precisely that kind of explainer, was very enthusiastic about the film. One of the comments I really look forward to is that he's going to write about it, and for him to write about it would be very significant, because where he starts from – where I think most militants in South Wales whatever their position, whether they're left Labour or Communist or New National Left or socialist republicans – start from – is the position that something very important has been lost. I mean, the depoliticisation is something that has happened – it's the problem. That decline is the problem. Now, of course, if you get a historian of his learning analysing it then you get a much clearer picture – but I think what he's feeling (I've just had this in a letter from him) is that this was getting at imaginatively the position from which you start. Whereas what the official Labour Party in South Wales is assuming, is that all the tradition is still there, that Wales is this solid Labour country with a great proletarian tradition and can never be anything else. It is observably becoming something else, it is in a state of great confusion – and the assertion of what sound like the positives, is actually the most negative and hopeless kind of cover-up of what the real situation is. There is tremendous vitality and then you have to relate that to the sense of shock at the referendum (against devolution in 1979), which was the great shock, because the cultural vitality among the most active and articulate people – among the writers and film/pop song makers, the intellectuals in a general way – which before the referendum was broadly moving in a radical and national direction, was so humiliated by the exposure of its minority situation that a whole new thinking and kind of argument had to start.

I think the two things that have to be said are: one, that the radical left in Britain has never been more vital or more theoretically informed or more capable of doing all kinds of cultural work; and two, I also think there's never been a greater distance between it and where most of the people who are the objects of its concern, and subjects of its concern, are living and thinking. The distance is very great. Therefore, it is only by some kind of received idea of vanguardism or some unreasonable reliance on the persistence of traditional positions, that the old simply positive

points can go on being made. Often, as I say, they are a block to this much sadder recognition of what the real shape of the problem is. Maybe then you need different figures who are not only the people suffering at the end of this process, but the people – however small a minority – who are reactive and fighting about it. Maybe you need that, if you were to tell the whole story.

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'SO THAT YOU CAN LIVE', I

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BY JANE CLARKE

It is only in very complex ways that we can truly understand where we are. It is only in very complex ways, and by moving confidently towards very complex societies, that we can defeat imperialism and capitalism and begin that construction of many socialisms which will liberate and draw upon our real and now threatened energies.¹

Cinema Action have been working as a socialist film collective since 1968. Anyone who has worked in a collective for fifteen days, let alone fifteen years, will recall all too vividly the hard work and time involved in any realisation of a collective ideal. Few left organisations still hold to this practice, and, although political and intellectual arguments have been made for moving away from collectivity, I believe it is a socialist aspiration which cannot be abandoned. When one adds to this the multiple problems involved in film production in Britain then the scope, consistency and political productivity of Cinema Action's practice is remarkable.

In their fifteen years Cinema Action have produced fifteen films. These include their early five minute silent cinetracts such as the 1968 *White Paper*, made as an immediate response to the Labour Government's 'In Place of Strife', a number of longer campaigning projects like *Fighting the Bill* 1970 and *The UCS Struggle* 1971, and three feature-length films: *People of Ireland* 1973, *Film From The Clyde* 1977 and

their most recent production, *So that you can live* 1981.

So that you can live took five years to make. What started as fairly immediate footage of an equal pay strike at a Welsh GEC works in 1976 has over the years had layer upon layer added to become an archaeology of the social, political, cultural and economic forces which shape the lives of a working class family in South Wales today. This transition from a campaigning perspective to a longer term analysis of contemporary society represents a continuing development in the practice of Cinema Action; a development which was beginning to emerge in the two earlier feature-length films, but which achieves full maturity and complexity in *So that you can live*.

Ann Lamche, a founding member of Cinema Action, has said² that it was their encounter with Shirley Butts, a shop steward at GEC who was actively involved in the equal pay strike, that set in motion a film with a different kind of focus, a move away from an exclusive examination of the politics of the workplace. After a day on the

¹ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, London, Verso, 1981, p 437, cited as a concluding title in the film.

² at a Guardian Lecture at the National Film Theatre in May 1982.

picket line Cinema Action returned with Shirley to her home and filmed her there with her husband Roy and her children Diane and Royston. There was no immediate follow up to this meeting as the film-makers were working on several more pressing projects, but they kept in touch with the Butts family. Over the next five years the collective returned to South Wales a number of times and interviewed Shirley, Roy, Diane, Royston and Shirley's mother, usually in their home, garden or workshop, but on one occasion at a motorcycle rally which the Butts had organised. During this period Shirley lost her job at GEC and therefore had to resign from the Union District Committee, and the family moved from a terraced house in Aberbargoed, a small town, to a more isolated cottage in the Sirhowy Valley. The cottage had a smallholding attached to it which the Butts began to work. The shape of *So that you can live* evolved as Cinema Action's relationship with the family evolved.

Such a project would be virtually impossible in network television because of the huge investment of time and personnel needed to realise it. The BBC did produce a multi-part documentary on *The Family*, memorable for its creation of an uneasy sense of intimacy with its 'ordinary' protagonists. The means by which this was achieved included an intrusive use of zoom and close-up employed to capture members of the family in moments of distress, embarrassment or, sometimes, joy. This kind of documentary film-making gives the viewer a thrill at the expense of the its subjects, but the Cinema Action camera keeps its distance, creating its sense of intimacy from relationships between subjects and crew built up over five years. It has been an integral part of Cinema Action's film-making practice to consult with the people they film, a method of working which could only have emerged from those in the independent sector prepared to invest huge amounts of unpaid labour in their films.

When network television does decide to trace its protagonists over a period of time it will usually return to its subjects after a prolonged absence. Granada's *World in Action* made a programme about truancy in March 1971 and then returned to the same location in November 1976 to film three of the original truants, by then young adults. Stephen Heath and Gillian

Skirrow have demonstrated how, in the second programme, *Yesterday's Truants*, location, music and commentary worked together to produce three easy-to-consume pocket biographies of the former truants from which any traces of social or political contradiction were removed (although occasionally, they argue, this process was not entirely successful).³ In its aspiration to offer three sealed portraits to the viewer *Yesterday's Truants* presents a revealing contrast to *So that you can live*. The Cinema Action film is actively interested in the contradictory forces and impulses which cross the Butts' lives. We are shown Shirley's passionate adherence to Trades Unionism and her simultaneous desire to be self-sufficient as she and Roy work their smallholding.

But *So that you can live* is much more than a portrait of a family. There are other witnesses in the film. A collier-farmer and some men who remember the railways are interviewed, and another recounts the history of the Miners' Libraries. Written texts are quoted at some length: from an historian's treatise on the Libraries; extracts from Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* and *Politics and Letters*, and two poignant and telling texts which were specially written by Williams for the film. One of these opens the film:

It's so close, this life in the family, in the valley, this effort and struggle at work. It is so close we don't need to be told about it, until we see that very different forces coming from right outside are putting such pressures on us that we are forced to ask what are lives really are, what this place really is.

The second text occurs near the close of the film:

We keep holding to each other, but in the end we can only do it if we have a country to hold to. It's been long and hard in the old ways, but the people are still here, the land is still here, under the old waste, the old mistakes. We have to look till we find ourselves again, find our country again and change it for ourselves.

³ Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow, 'Television, a World in Action', *Screen Summer* 1977, Vol 18 no 2, pp 7-59.



'It's so close, this life in the family': Diane, Roy and Shirley Butts.

This is *both* a lament and a call to action. Recognition of loss does not have to lead to paralysis: it can free one to make changes.

The *ciné-vérité* style footage of the Butts family is intercut with visual material which has a markedly different style and feel to it: there are tracking shots across rows of books and boarded up houses which appear to connect the decline in working class institutions of education – the demise of the Workers' Libraries – with the erosion of working class communities through unemployment – the empty houses exposing the migration out of Wales to look for work. There are also repeated tracking shots across the valleys over which a musical theme returns again and again. We feel as if we are being moved as the camera takes us across the valley in its tracks. Is this why these tracking shots generate such an emotional pull (do all tracking shots move us?) or is it the accumulated cultural associations of the green valleys which does this? These sequences are profoundly moving and cannot be reduced to a single meaning. Moreover, it seems perverse to deny the emotional and visual pleasure of these

sequences. A film does not do the same work as an article or a lecture. Film-making has a potential to re-work and re-value images, to unblock us, to point to new meanings, which has great value.

There is another important device which structures the film. Diane retells the history of the relationship between her family and Cinema Action. This is a retrospective account of that relationship as it developed over five years, and it serves to remind us of the intervention of the film-makers and the artifice of film itself. Diane is photographed in appropriately connotative locations at these moments. One of the very first images of the film shows Diane standing with her back to the camera looking out over the London skyline. She is asked what she thinks of London and replies: 'Well, it's big, it's flat really compared to Wales, except for the buildings. And the population, everywhere you go there's somebody. And I mean there is no grass or nothing like you got to go to a park to see grass.' This scene has been set up to begin the examination of the gap between the city and the

country, a major theme of the film.

Similarly, the first footage shot in the Butts' home is introduced by Diane recalling: 'I was at my gran's and my mother was late coming to pick us from work so I went down the house myself, and my father answered the door, and there were all these strange people there, and lights - 'cause I didn't know you then - so I just walked straight through into the back because I was really shy, and my father came out after a while and told me that Mam had invited you in, and what you was doing.' We hear Diane's subjective account of how she experienced that first visit as we see the actual moment of the visit. But there is an important shift, because of this device, in her relation to the images. No longer a shy child, she now speaks as a more confident sixteen-year-old who is familiar with the film-makers. She has been given, retrospectively, some control over their representation of herself and her family.

The different voices and texts and the range of visual styles in the film work together like so many layers of knowledge and experience which return repeatedly to a number of themes which can never be finally or fully represented. Schematically one can map the themes into six overlapping areas:

History (the oral history embodied by the collier-farmer and other interviewees; the social history of the Miners' Libraries and the industrial archaeologist; the personal history of the film's making).

Education (the decline of the libraries; Diane reading the GCE exam questions on Wales; the grandmother's observations that her children do not read).

Culture (the drummers; the brass band; the bingo club; the motor cycle rally).

Employment (Shirley and Royston's loss of jobs;

the scene in the Job Centre; Diane's anxieties about finding work).

Industry (the closing of South Wales' mines and steelworks and the move to light industry; the role of the Forestry Commission).

Communications (the closing down of the railways; the service bus that takes 90 minutes to cover a 20 minute journey; the large profits of the GEC Telecommunications works).

These themes are raised because the film-makers have chosen to ask certain key questions and to shoot certain key locations. We are shown the valley where the railway used to be and the old track lines are still identifiable on the land. Later the camera moves into the Job Centre and scans the noticeboard which is full of requests for experienced steel workers, but the jobs are in West Germany or Holland. The film-makers develop a sense of what it is to live in South Wales in the 1980s. What emerges is a many-faceted portrayal of one specific site of a worldwide crisis in capitalism. As the profitability of the mines and steelworks decline, facilities are withdrawn and it becomes more and more difficult to move around Wales, easier to move out of Wales.

So that you can live gives us key questions and key locations but not the key to final political certainties. There has been a change in the political environment since Cinema Action was formed fifteen years ago. The post-'68 euphoria about the possibilities of left film-making has been evaporating for years. Few people still believe that the camera can, or should, give political leadership. The great value of *So that you can live* is its grasp and representation of a complex historical moment, and Cinema Action's achievement should not be overlooked because they dare to offer us a difficult and painful vision.

'SO THAT YOU CAN LIVE', II

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BY SUE ASPINALL AND MANDY MERCK

Hailed as 'the most important British independent film since Berwick Street Film Collective's *Nightcleaners*¹, scheduled as a curtain raiser for Channel Four, Cinema Action's *So that you can live* could yet fall victim to the Death-by-Institutionalisation of the 'paradigmatic' independent film². We come neither to bury nor to praise it, but simply to examine certain premises – cinematic, political, cultural – which we believe inform both its reception and its making.

Among the strict commandments of puritanical British documentary-making is the one, from left and right, which says Thou Shalt Not make a film which is eloquent, moving and complex.
(Don Macpherson, City Limits)

The film has been widely congratulated for posing an alternative to a didactic, vanguardist perspective and its related aesthetic, for reaching beyond the textbook situations of industrial militancy to the broader circumstances – family, culture, international finance, education, transport – which may recompose or discourage such militancy. This strategy is certainly worth supporting, although not as unique as the film's reviewers have suggested in their characterisations of the British documentary's 'puritanism' and 'lack of personal warmth and vitality'³. Feminist work in particular (Betteshanger 1972, *The Amazing Equal Pay Show* 1974, *Whose Choice?* 1976, and *Song of the Shirt* 1979) belies such estimates. But whatever its antecedents, *So that you can live* is an

ambitious project, an estimable attempt at no less than a political economy of a region's decline.

A profound sense of loss and frustration is at the film's heart, and it brackets its founding footage – the picket for an ill-fated equal pay strike at the Welsh GEC Treforest estate in 1976 – with tracking shots of a local boys' drum band drilling back and forth between the slag wastes. (The forward march of labour halted?) Statements of thwarted aspiration ('We're going back to them days when the woman's place is in the house') and redundant tactics ('In GEC's, when we went on strike for equality, we had the chance to fight for it, but now they just come up to you and say, right, this is closing and that's it') are formally emphasised by a circular rather than linear use of dialogue – in which interviews, conversations and spoken texts are fragmented and interlayered. (The topographical motif is made explicit by frequent references to local industrial archaeology.) The effect, as in the use of brief and reprised musical themes, is both developmental and repetitive – following the Butts' story through the five years after the strike, as they move from a Welsh town to a country smallholding, the children grow up, and

¹ Michael Chanan, 'So that you can live (For Shirley)', *Framework* 18, 1982, pp 7-8.

² Nicky Hamlyn, 'Dora, a Suitable Case for Treatment', *Undercut* 3/4, March 1982, p 52.

³ Jo Imeson, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1982, p 10.



The forward march of labour halted? The drum band in *So that you can live*.

the local mines, factories and steelworks close down.

Cinema Action's refusal to provide an unifying overview or analysis can be traced to their tradition of self-effacement, offering 'to voices so often silenced a space to speak'⁴. But this approach has also been criticised for repressing 'its own role in the production of political meanings'⁵: although it is the film-makers who introduce the questions of 'crisis' and 'mode of production', these are presented as quotations from others – Hywel Francis on the Miners' Libraries, Raymond Williams on capitalism – without a reflexive analysis of the rationale for their inclusion or juxtaposition.

The use of Raymond Williams' texts (spoken and as intertitles) is particularly problematic. These are spaced throughout the film, as if to situate the other material within the framework of wider determinations. However, in the

absence of other extended extrapolations on this material, the effect of these remarks about complexity and capitalism is often a sense of awe at mysterious forces at work, rather than a sharpening of understanding.

The Butts family's migration from waged work in a town to a subsistence smallholding in the country (and in the case of the daughter Diane, briefly to the city) offers a matrix for the broader analysis posed by Williams' work. Although the film's accompanying documentation, and repeated shots of the paperback's cover, suggest that Williams' *The Country and the City* was a major source, many of that study's most apposite

⁴ Sylvia Harvey, 'So that you can live (for Shirley)', *Undercut* 3/4, March 1982, p 67.

⁵ David Glyn and Paul Marris, 'Seven Years of Cinema Action', *Afterimage* 6, Summer 1976, p 69.

themes are not examined – notably the conflict between traditional socialist conceptions of the city as the site of rational progress, and the counter association of agrarian life with the ‘human’ and the ‘natural’. Yet at stake, we would argue, is a crucial question for the film – what Williams describes elsewhere as ‘the central Marxist teaching... that a social system can produce a liberation of productive forces, which at the same time involve new and durable forms of exploitation’.⁶

Here a rather less contradictory countryside is presented in musically-backed tracking shots and scenes of Diane swinging from a carefully framed Palmeresque oak (in long shot across a sunny field) or letting the ducks out of their pen. Although later Shirley Butts does comment on the bleakness of her period of unemployment in the countryside, this conflict between rural pleasure and rural poverty and isolation is not enlarged upon. The film seems not to question its own aestheticisation of these images of Diane, or of the landscape generally. In fact, it frequently deploys landscape to produce a sense of melancholy and loss, creating an elegaic mood reminiscent of the Augustan idealisation of the obscure countryman dwelling in rural simplicity. Compare Gray and Thomson, or Goldsmith’s lament for the ‘Deserted Village’ of the eighteenth century enclosures:

*Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn
Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms
withdrawn...
One only master grasps the whole domain
And half a tillage stints thy smiling plain...
Sunk are thy bowers in shapeless ruin all,
And the long grass o’ertops the mouldering wall,
And trembling, shrinking from the spoiler’s hand,
Far, far away thy children leave the land.*

The film’s sense of loss, of landscapes and communities evacuated by capitalism, proposes the past as its major source of value, the embodiment of a greater sense of community and class identity. The sequence on the Miners’ Libraries harks back to a golden age of militancy and working class culture, but the film does not try to account for its demise. It doesn’t engage with the changes in political attitude that might attend a shift from heavy industry to the service and state sectors.⁷ It largely avoids the culture which has replaced older Welsh traditions

founded on literacy: the losses and gains of television, compulsory secondary education and (beyond a brief bingo sequence) the commercialisation of leisure. Yet at the same time, the film’s own sequences often include – but do not work upon – something of what is left: the macho display of the motorbike rallies; the popular fictions criticised by the historian of the workers’ libraries, who sees their rise as commensurate with the end of a resistant political culture; the contemporary teenage life of Diane (interestingly signalled – for us? – by soundtrack music from bands like Scritti Politti and Pig Bag, but never examined in the diegesis).

Similarly, the film both raises and refuses questions about sexual and familial life. Taking the family as the type of the embattled class⁸ ironically exempts it from precisely the political scrutiny the film would attempt. This, combined with an understandable sympathy/discretion/anti-voyeurism (are they the same?) on the part of its makers, places the family almost above analysis. Although the film engages extensively with the sexism facing Shirley and Diane in employment, trade unions, education and even the Workers’ Institute, it cannot do the same in the domestic sphere. Potential conflicts may be glimpsed (a restless Diane leaves her mother’s side during one long interview to lean on her silent Dad; Shirley’s son Royston and his wife move in with their baby; the local bike rally is a men-only race, with the Butts women providing refreshments and posters) but they are rarely followed up – and then, most notably, when Shirley discusses her loneliness while out of work. The family economy (housing, housework, subsistence farming, etc.) is examined, but in a way which presents the home as another industrial

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, Verso 1981, p 312.

⁷ Gwyn Williams, ‘Mother Wales, get off me back?’, *Marxism Today*, December 1981, p 17. Williams argues that Wales today is ‘much less distinctive and much less proletarian’.

⁸ cf Raymond Williams, *The Welsh Industrial Novel*, quoted in the film’s documentation: ‘The most accessible immediate form, in this kind of novel, is the story of a family. This gives the writer his focus on primary relationships but of course with the difficulty that what is really being written, through it, is the story of a class... The family has then to be typical, carrying the central common experiences...’

location—a tactic which even the ‘family as factory’ argument of *Numero Deux* escapes to raise questions of sexuality, kinship and the body.

Shirley herself, in her accounts of the frustration experienced in performing and losing her role in the local union structure, raises provocative problems: ‘the union is my life, I love it, next to my family of course. I think I’d put my family first if necessary, but at the moment they’re enjoying their health and ...’ In other scenes she describes the prestige which her knowledge of work-place organisation gives her in the community and her intense pleasure in serving on the union’s district committee (a photo of its members at a branch dance shows them to be all male except for Shirley). These scenes hint at powers and pleasures in trade union activism which are hardly uncontradictory, and might well have been pursued without closing down analysis.

Such work isn’t proposed to displace one of the film’s most satisfying tactics, an attempt to penetrate beyond the literal and factual to the ‘feel’ of life, and the sense of the past held in memory. This strategy sustains the dreamlike quality of recollection by slow tracks across landscape and townscape, while disembodied voices speak, as if from inside the head of the viewing eye. At times this is explicitly metaphorical (the camera tracks along a dark wall to a discussion of struggle and pressures; then the wall ends, and the frame opens into light and space, revealing the valley beyond as the voice over considers ‘what our lives really are, what this place really is’). At others, the image/sound relation is less illustrative, more open to multiple constructions. But a limit is often set upon meaning by a surprisingly conventional use of signifiers, rendering the past both unproblematic and nostalgically pleasurable. Old photographs,

for instance, are frequently employed as artefacts—as signs of and from history. And the repeated refrains of piano and flute seem to signal elegy.

So that you can live concludes with a text by Raymond Williams insisting upon the multiplicity and complexity of any successful socialist strategy. Interestingly, precisely that observation has been cited by Perry Anderson as an important corrective to the ‘social simplicity’ of Romantic Utopianism in its historical debate with approaches founded in a confident Utilitarian rationalism. ‘The duty of socialists’, Anderson argues, ‘is not to pit one against the other yet again, but to set both intellectually in their changing historical settings and to prepare practically the conditions for the long-awaited blessing of their mutual end.’⁹

In this summer of so many defeats, that wait may seem almost interminable, as though, in the phrase Anderson borrows from the *Grundrisse*, ‘with this present emptiness history has come to a standstill’. In asking films to make more of the present—in all its personal, cultural and economic dimensions—we are not arguing for its defeats to be disguised, but rather for its contradictions to be more fully realised. In anticipating the supercession of the old opposing ‘tourniquet’ of Utopian hopes and inherited pieties, we are encouraged by Cinema Action’s plans for their next film: ‘to include a method which will distinctly provide another point of view which is not simply part of the action of the film but which is commenting on it, and raising questions about it’.¹⁰

⁹ Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, Verso, 1980, p 169.

¹⁰ See the interview with Raymond Williams in this issue, p 149.
